スレイヤーズすぺしゃる㉙

魔法の老女プリンシア

神坂 一

イラスト あらいずみるい

富士見ファンタジア文庫

Slayers Special Volume 29

Magical Old Woman Princia

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(February 2026)

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It Can't Be Called a Copycat (Part 1)

I woke up in my room at the inn, feeling a heavy tightness in my chest. When I opened my eyes, Naga was standing by my bedside.

"What is the meaning of this?" I asked.

I was currently stuck to the opposite wall, upside down. My heart was still pounding, but for the moment, I focused on steadying my breathing. I glared at Naga. The tiny, tiny flame of the lamp, turned down low, dimly illuminated the room.

".....Gah....."

Naga twitched slightly, then suddenly—*wham!*—she sat up, stomped over to me, and yelled, "Why did you suddenly kick me!?"

"Hey, Lina!!"

"As if I wouldn't kick you!"

She raised a voice of unreasonable protest without even giving me an answer, and I shouted back just as hard. A supernatural phenomenon in human form. A woman self-identifying as my rival, Naga the Serpent, wearing high-exposure clothing with spiked shoulder guards and a skull necklace around her neck! With someone dressed like that standing by my bed, there was no choice but to attack and put some distance between us.

However... usually, she would appear with a boisterous laugh, regardless of how much she bothered people. To have her appear like this, holding her breath in the middle of the night—it was incomprehensible.

Naga, as if remembering something, lowered her voice. "Actually, for some reason, I was being chased by the city guards."

Hearing that, I remembered. The city's security had been strangely tight. When I stopped in Tremad City for the evening, the guards at the entrance had asked me several questions, and even as I walked through the streets, I noticed many lightly armed guards. I had thought something was going on...

I pressed my hand to my forehead. "......I see..... so it finally happened....."

"What do you mean 'finally', Lina! I haven't done anything shady!"

Just as Naga was stubbornly trying to say something more, we looked at each other—and simultaneously turned our eyes to the window.

".....What is that?"

I approached and opened it; outside was the night sky. The wind was cold. The room was on the third floor of the inn. In the distance, a church spire stood as a dark silhouette. The roofs of the houses huddled together lower than my line of sight, and the radiant full moon faintly illuminated the world.

There, under the moonlight, was a single shadow leaping from one roof to the next!

Even under the moonlight, it was still night. I couldn't see the facial features or fine details, but the long hair flowing in the wind, the fluttering cape, and the chest that swayed wildly with every movement were clearly visible even from this distance.

The shadow, without paying the slightest mind to its pursuers, hopped around the rooftops for a while before suddenly vanishing.

Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!

A boisterous laugh, resembling something familiar, drifted from somewhere in the distance. The laughter faded, and only the sound of whistles continued to echo through the night for a while.

".....It's sad when someone lacks self-awareness, isn't it?" Naga muttered blankly at my whisper.

"What's that supposed to mean!?"

"I'm saying that's a criminal act!"

"I see."

"That's why! You, your very existence—"

"Hmph! It's true people sometimes say 'beauty is a crime'."

"That's not what I mean!"

After saying that, I let out a small sigh. For now, there was no point in arguing.

".....Fine, Naga. I'll believe what you're saying."

".....Lina....."

"So let's turn ourselves in. Okay?"

"Hey, you don't believe me at all!"

I didn't get angry. I figured we'd just give it a shot and try turning ourselves in with a light heart—

"I can't forgive this."

The next morning, in the dining hall on the first floor of the inn. Naga slammed her empty beer mug onto the table with a *thud* and spoke with fixed eyes.

For the time being, I understood that someone dressed like Naga was doing something bad in this city. That was likely why she had been chased by the guards. To avoid trouble, Naga was now wearing a very ordinary outfit I had prepared—a shirt, jacket, and long skirt—with her black hair tied up in a ponytail, but she seemed to be in a strangely foul mood, perhaps because she didn't like the style.

"I can't forgive them... You mean the person from last night?"

"Of course!" Naga replied to my question with a murderous gaze. "What was with that high-pitched laughter!?"

"That's the part you're mad about!?"

"——Hmph. Listen well, Lina. You might not be able to comprehend it, but 'high-pitched laughter' isn't something you just do by shouting loudly!"

"I'm fine with not comprehending it."

While we were talking, the lady of the inn brought over the soup, bread, cheese, salad, and roast duck with liqueur sauce we had ordered for breakfast.

"By the way, ma'am, I saw someone running over the rooftops last night making a weird laughing sound... What was that?"

When I asked casually, the lady replied while lining the plates on the table. "Oh. You saw that? The strange thief, right?"

"A thief?" Naga and I asked in unison.

"Yes. I haven't seen her myself, but I hear she dresses strangely and steals things while letting out a weird laugh. They say she's working quite a racket and making a lot of money."

".....I think she was called... Serpent Naga, or something like that."

"Se... Serpent...?"

"Naga, you say.....!"

The two of us couldn't help but look at each other. Of course, the lady had misremembered the thief's name, but it was far too similar to the name of Naga the White Serpent. The outfit, the idiotic laugh, and the name. At this point, it had gone beyond the realm of mere coincidence.

After the lady left the dishes and departed, Naga poked at her squid salad with a fork, her eyes burning with anger. "......Hmph..... I see. In other words, there's someone out there committing thefts while pretending to be me!"

"I suppose so," I said, sipping my soup.

"In that case, we are going to catch that fake! Lina!"

If this were any other situation, I would have refused, saying it was too much trouble. I decided to help for two reasons. First, the story about the thief making a lot of money. If we defeated her and took the treasure, it would be quite a profit.

And the other reason: while I didn't intend to play the hero, I felt I couldn't leave someone with the dangerous mindset of trying to imitate Naga on the loose.

"I don't mind lending a hand, on one condition."

"......Ugh....."

Naga gasped for a moment at the condition I proposed.

"So be it. I'll take down that person and take all the treasure, but my share will be fifty percent."

Naga hesitated for a moment, but eventually gave in. "......Hmph. It can't be helped. I'll agree to those terms."

"Alright. Negotiations concluded. We'll start the investigation after breakfast... but I feel like calling out your name in the city will cause unnecessary misunderstandings, so we should call you by a suitable fake name. Let's see."

I glanced around and my eyes landed on the dining hall menu. Among the items, I found "Aunt Grace’s Chicken Stew."

"From now on, you're Grace."

Naga made a face for a second at the extremely lazy naming[1], but she nodded reluctantly. "............Well... given the circumstances, I suppose it can't be helped....."

We finished breakfast and immediately began our investigation. After asking a few people nearby, we quickly found out where last night's crime scene was. Naga and I headed there first—

"............Umm..... Is this the place?"

We stopped at the edge of the road with bewildered faces. I had imagined a scene with crowds of onlookers and guards shouting while directing traffic. Instead, there was just a single guard in light gear—leather armor and a long sword over a uniform—standing bored in front of the entrance of a very ordinary house. People passing by would occasionally glance over, but that was it. It didn't look like the scene of a crime by a rumored thief.

However, there wouldn't be a guard there if we had the wrong place. I approached to ask a question and realized that the guard, with her short-cropped blonde hair, was actually a woman.

"Oh, she's a woman," I accidentally let slip.

Immediately, the female guard turned around and screamed, "What's wrong with being a woman!?"

Naga and I were taken aback as she glared at us, eyes seething with anger, and stepped closer. "The fixed idea that a guard must be a man is nothing but the harmful product of a traditional, warped society built by men—sexism and misogyny! I urge you to reflect deeply on the fact that you, as a woman, haven't even realized such a thing!"

"Eh? Eh? Um, excuse me?"

I was confused, being snapped at for something I didn't even understand. Naga stood beside me, directing a smirk my way as she intentionally needled me.

"Hmph. 'Out of the mouth comes evil,' right, Lina?"

The female guard glared at Naga—one "busty" woman to another—with a burning gaze.

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[1] Her name is in fact Gracia so this is a Pea, Tear, Griffin gag.

"Big chests are also the enemy!"

"Whaaaaaaaat?!?!"

While Naga cried out in shock, I instinctively grabbed the female guard's hands.

"Comrade!"

It might have been partly due to her leather armor, but looking at her, her volume wasn't much different from my own. Once she noticed my chest size, her expression brightened instantly.

"Do you understand?! To begin with, deciding a woman's value based on her breast size is nothing but discrimination!"

"Of course it is! Oh, I'm Lina. Lina Inverse. A traveling sorceress."

"I am Helen Weaver. As you can see, I'm a guard."

Female friendship blossomed in an instant.

"Yeah, actually, Helen—oh, it's okay if I call you Helen, right? Actually, I've taken a request from a certain person to look into the female thief who's been causing trouble in this town lately."

"In that case, could it be—" Helen glanced at Naga, who was looming behind me. "Is that woman with the needlessly large chest the client?"

"Needlessly...!"

Before Naga could start complaining, I cut in. "Mm, well, something like that. Her name is Grace, but... sorry. I can't really talk about the details."

I hadn't expected to hit it off with a guard so suddenly, so I just came up with something on the spot.

"I see. So there are circumstances," Helen said, convincing herself. She thought for a moment. "I don't mind telling you various things, but... in exchange, let me have a piece of this talk about catching the thief."

"A piece...?"

"A Bite."

Naga and I both frowned at the strange proposal.

"You say that easily, but... don't you have your job as a guard?"

"It doesn't matter. The only missions I get sent on are the ones that don't matter anyway. This is clearly gender discrimination."

I wasn't sure if it was discrimination, but being told to stand watch alone at a crime scene where the investigation seemed finished did feel like a throwaway job.

"The world is full of contempt and prejudice against women. I work day and night to rectify such unfairness. As part of my activities, I chose this job as a guard, which is said to be unsuitable for women."

"I'm surprised you were hired."

"I had my father pull some strings from behind the scenes."

"Hey."

Is that actually okay?

"But once I actually became a guard, the training was hard, and I only got assigned to back-office work. I started to hate it, but if I just quit, it feels like losing. If I can use the 'leftovers' from you and Lina to earn some merit and show the power of women before I quit, it'll look better."

She said leftovers!! I couldn't tell if this person had pride or not.

"Besides, when I say 'take a piece,' I don't mean I'll be acting with you all the time. I'll provide information, and in return, you'll help me earn some merit. If I can successfully earn merit with your cooperation, I'll even prepare a small reward."

"Hmph! If that's the case!" Naga stepped forward aggressively. "This Ser—"

Smack!

My palm strike hit Naga right in the temple. She staggered.

"Wha—what are you doing, Lina?!"

"Oh, sorry. There was a bug. So, what's the rest of the story, Grace?"

Naga looked sheepish. She seemed to have realized she'd forgotten her alias.

"I just wanted to say... I agree too!"

"Then it's settled. Well then—"

Nodding, Helen began to tell us about the series of incidents.

It started about three months ago. One day, a notice of theft arrived at the home of a powerful man. The name of the sender was Sapento Naga—neither Serpent nor Naga. It seems it was Sapento-Naga to the very end. The date was written there... so that old lady hadn't remembered it wrong after all.

At first, it was thought to be a prank, but because it was an influential house, it couldn't be ignored. Several guards stood watch, and in the end, nothing happened at that house.

In the morning, word reached the guards that a female thief had entered the home of another influential person. Gold coins and jewels were stolen, and on the wall was graffiti that said "That one was a lie, Naga."

The guards were furious.

From there, a game of cat and mouse began between the thief and the guards, but the result went without saying. The thief used a method of issuing a notice and then stealing from a different location, but just when they thought they had it figured out, the thief actually showed up at the notified location once.

There was no pattern to the targets; it ranged from famous wealthy families to general stores on the street. The culprit had been spotted a few times: long black hair, an outfit like a swimsuit, a strange mask covering her eyes, and a huge chest. And then, there was that signature loud laughter.

The characteristics matched the person we saw last night.

"Hmm..." I groaned after hearing the story.

At first, I thought this incident was the work of someone with a grudge against Naga, or perhaps someone who admired her.

"Eh?"

If that were the case, I figured that using the real Naga as bait would make her show up easily. However—if that were it, she wouldn't get Naga's name wrong. Most likely, the culprit had seen Naga somewhere before and was simply imitating those traits when she committed the thefts.

"Any leads on the culprit?"

"We've caught suspicious people a few times," Helen replied. "But in the end, they were all wrong."

"Quite the unreliable guards, aren't they?"

"I don't want to hear that from someone with a big chest!"

Naga teased her, and Helen got indignant.

"But in that case... I guess we really have to catch her at the scene," I said. "But we don't know when the next crime will be..."

"No, I know," Helen said calmly. "To tell you the truth, the next notice has already arrived. The next crime is tomorrow night."

The stone statues protecting the church roof reflected the moonlight quietly. The wind was cold. The night was deep, and the moon looked slightly thinner than it had two days ago.

Naga and I were at the very edge of the church's highest spire. It was a risky spot, but if the date was correct—

We had waited for the sun to go down, then slipped out of the inn's window under the cover of darkness using *Levitation* to look out over the city. From this high up, the only things lighting the night were the moon and stars. However, looking down, I saw that wasn't quite true. Small, flickering lights scattered across the city were lamps held by guards.

"The guards are finally getting serious, it seems. They've had the rug pulled out from under them so many times," Naga said, sitting beside me.

"They have to. I'd hate to be stood up in a place like this."

The plan Naga and I had—without telling Helen—was to beat the thief ourselves first, make her confess where the treasure was, and then knock her out and hand her over to Helen, claiming she "resisted fiercely."

That way, Helen would get the credit and Naga and I would get the treasure—a perfectly smooth solution!

"Helen is probably around there," I said, looking toward a certain area.

The place Naga was pointing at was a bit further away. Not as big as the church, but a relatively large building crouching in the darkness. I was told it was a government office.

"And the notice was for over there."

I looked in a different direction. There were no special features to the houses, but there was a concentration of guard lamps. That was the location in the notice. I heard it was a small local moneylender.

The plan was—once the thief appeared, Naga and I would use *High-Speed Flight* to chase them and drive them toward Helen. Then Helen would catch them.

If we followed that, the stolen treasure would be confiscated by the authorities. Of course, I wouldn't allow that!

By the way, Naga was currently wearing normal clothes instead of her usual outfit, with trousers for ease of movement. Even if we caught the thief, having Naga there in her usual outfit would just cause unnecessary misunderstanding from the guards.

Everything was ready. All that was left was for the thief to show up.

"Naga, wait a second!"

I interrupted my spell and signaled Naga to stop.

"What is it, Lina?"

"...Something's weird. Moving now is... probably too early."

"Something? Like what?"

I hesitated when she asked. What was it? This indefinable sense of wrongness. The lamps in the street below kept moving—

That's it! Suddenly, I realized the reason for the unease.

The sound of the guards' whistles echoed through the night just as the moon tilted toward the west! Looking down, the scattered lamp lights showed hurried movement. The sound came from the government office. Not from the house in the notice.

"Hmph! Here she comes!"

Naga stood up, and I began to chant the *High-Speed Flight* spell in my head.

Suddenly, a premonition ran down my spine. I looked over the city. So many moving lights, and so many still.

"The whistle?"

"There was only one whistle at first, and then nothing after that, right?! If the guards found the thief and were chasing her, they'd be blowing them over and over!"

"Then that was—"

"A diversion!" I shouted, looking around the city.

If this guess was right, the thief had set something up to blow the whistle and draw the guards' attention there—meaning she should be breaking in somewhere else right now.

Of course, it was nearly impossible to find that "somewhere else" from here, and the guards focused on the whistle were unlikely to notice the thief elsewhere. If only I could make the guards realize that whistle was a diversion, but how—

There was a way!

I grabbed Naga's shoulders tightly. "Naga!"

"...What?"

"Laugh!"

"[..... Do wha ~]?"

Naga frowned, not understanding, but I looked down at the city.

"Issue a challenge! To the thief who's half-assedly using your name! Show her we saw through her pathetic diversion!"

At my explanation, Naga gave a small smirk. "...Hmph. Lina, for you, that's not a bad plan."

Lights began to appear in the quiet houses. This was—Naga's serious, idiotic laugh! Even with my ears covered, the wind and the very air vibrated to carry the sound!

The movement of the guards' lights showed obvious confusion.

"Naga! Good job!" I gave her a thumbs up.

Now then. We didn't have to wait long.

Preeee!

A whistle blew from a completely different direction!

It came!

Whether the thief had panicked and made a mistake because of Naga's laugh, or someone waking up had spotted her, she'd been found by the guards! Whistles blew again and again from that direction. No doubt! This one was the real thing!

"This time for real, Naga!"

"Hmph! Understood!"

We both chanted at once. Our words drifted on the night wind—two words of power in unison!

Wing Shield!

Naga and I activated our *High-Speed Flight*, wrapped ourselves in barriers of wind, and raced through the night sky toward where the second whistle had blown!

The figure of the thief—I found it immediately!

In a corner of the city where lamp lights flickered, a figure with long black hair and a black cloak was climbing onto a roof. Even in the darkness of night, I could clearly see that her chest was unusually large. No mistake! That was her!

Naga and I exchanged a nod and controlled our flight paths toward the shadow on the roof.

The thief began to run across the roof while keeping an eye on the guards below—then she noticed us and turned around!

She jumped sideways instinctively to dodge my charge—but Naga, who had been charging right behind me, slammed into her!

I grabbed the black-haired woman’s arm. Staring straight into her eyes, I said, "Your transparent explanatory dialogue is one thing, but you’ve still got mud on you from when you fell earlier."

"Wh—" The woman hurriedly looked down at her clothes—

"Gotcha. There isn't actually any mud, but that agitation is the best proof of all."

"Then that woman is—"

"Exactly."

Taking a direct hit, the shadow fell straight off the roof!

"That woman from before!" Naga peered into the back of the alley. The opponent sprawled on the ground for an instant, but staggered to her feet and ducked into a nearby alleyway.

"You're a bad liar."

I wasn't about to let her get away! While keeping the High-Speed Flight spell active allowed for speed, it didn't allow for sharp turns. Naga and I cancelled the spell, landed on the ground, and dashed into the alley where the thief had fled!

Nothing moved in the cluttered, narrow alley. The whistles of the guards sounded closer than I expected. Naga and I ran through the alley and came out onto a somewhat larger street.

Scanning the surroundings quickly, I caught a fleeting glimpse of a figure disappearing into another alley a short distance away. I nodded to Naga as she turned toward me. The two of us dashed that way! Just as we were about to charge into the alley—

"Whoa!"

I nearly collided with a woman coming out of there. blond short hair. Her clothes were perfectly ordinary, and she didn't have much of a chest. Her features were those of a completely different person.

And so, one incident ended—or so it should have been.

In a suspicious voice, she asked, "Wh... what is it? First that woman earlier, and now you people..."

"..... Good grief. It looks like things are going to get a bit troublesome."

It was a little past noon the next day. Helen, who visited Naga and me at our inn, started off with a clouded expression.

"Troublesome... you say?"

"Hey! Don't tell me you're going to say you can't give us a reward!" I said while drinking juice in the first-floor dining room of the inn, while Naga drank wine.

Last night after that, Naga and I handed the woman we caught over to the guards who arrived. However—the guards arrived sooner than expected, so I couldn't carry out the original plan of squeezing the location of the treasure out of the thief. I also ended up failing to let Helen take the credit. Nonetheless, since we did help catch a thief, I had asked Helen if some kind of reward might be issued...

Sitting at the table and glancing our way, Helen said, "It's hard to say this... but was that woman really the culprit?"

"I can only say it's impossible to think otherwise," I replied.

"The story is that the first whistle was due to the culprit's gimmick, right?"

It was none other than Helen who had explained that to us last night. On the roof, which was a blind spot from the ground, a gimmick had been set up where a string would burn through once a candle reached a certain point, letting a human-sized cloth doll dangle from another string and swing across the street...

"She waited for night, went outside, and set the gimmick. She disguised herself with a wig and clothes, then started the theft at the signal of the whistle. But when we cornered her, she quickly shed the disguise and pretended to be a passerby."

I repeated the explanation I gave last night when we handed the blond-haired woman over to the guards. However, Helen looked troubled.

"I understand the logic, and even I think that woman is suspicious, but... if that hypothesis is correct, there should be a wig, a cloak, or strange clothes for the disguise near the scene. But they haven't been found, and no stolen goods were found at the woman's house either—"

"They just haven't been found 'yet,' right? Maybe she hid the stolen goods somewhere else."

Ignoring my words, Helen continued. "Just a short while ago, it seems a new advance notice arrived at a certain house. You can't send a notice if you're the woman being held, right? What's more, under these circumstances, we have to judge that the woman is innocent."

"Eeeeeeeeh!?"

At Helen's words, both Naga and I reflexively raised our voices.

(It can't be called a copycat, will be continued!)

Is the woman innocent or guilty?! The fierce pursuit of the prosecutor and the arguments of the defense attorney who believes in the defendant clash hotly in the courtroom! Can the judicial system find the truth hidden in the darkness?! What is the verdict handed down as the judge’s gavel roars?

It wasn't that kind of story, but anyway, next time: "It Can't Be Called a Copycat" (Part 2)! Well, in the end, in a tight-knit society like Japan, verdicts are often reached through mutual compromise while considering the face of the prosecutor and defense attorney—wait for it while I mutter things like that!

It Can't Be Called a Copycat" (Part 2)

Just like the night five days ago, the lights of lamps held by guards were scattered here and there throughout the city. Something was bothering me. Looking out over the city in the darkness, the spire of the church stood a short distance away.

Perhaps she didn't hear my words of restraint—using the High-Speed Flight spell, Naga jumped off the roof!

Geez! She's too impatient! I hurriedly chanted a spell—"Levitation!"

What Lina and Naga saw in Tremad City was a female thief dressed much like Naga, laughing loudly! Naturally, they couldn't just leave it alone, and the one who appeared before the two as they began their investigation was a female guard named Helen. Wanting to show up her colleagues who looked down on her, she proposed a joint investigation with Lina and her partner. Then, on the day the thief predicted, Lina and Naga pursued a figure appearing on the roofs and caught a woman who seemed to be the culprit! But the very next day after catching the woman, a new advance notice of a theft arrived!

"What do you think is going on?" Naga asked me, exposed to the night breeze. We were currently on the roof of the city's government office. Naga was, as expected, wearing ordinary clothes different from her usual ones, but she looked quite cramped in them. The moon, which had been round when we arrived in this city, had now grown quite thin, nearing a half-moon.

—It was five days ago that we caught the woman thought to be the thief who mimicked Naga's appearance. But the next day, a new notice arrived. Was the previous woman not the culprit? Or—

"To be honest, I can't really say." I shrugged my shoulders slightly. "At this point, there are too few clues. But either way, we should be able to narrow things down today."

The date of the crime written on the newly arrived notice was today. Today. Would an incident occur? Or would nothing happen?

If we wanted to overlook the entire city, it would have been better to take up a position on that spire, but after considering various things, we decided to keep watch here today. Of course, I had told our client—or rather, our collaborator—Helen beforehand that we would be

watching from here. She was supposed to be patrolling with a lamp around the opposite side of the church.

As time flowed, the moon slowly moved across the sky—

How much time had passed? It was unexpected that the place where the laughter broke out was directly beneath this building!

"Wait a second, Naga."

"Raywing!"

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho.....!!"

At the sudden burst of laughter, Naga and I cried out simultaneously. The appearance of the thief was within our expectations. Using a spell with a short chant and easy control, I descended. Chanting another spell as I went down, I looked at the path below; Naga was there all by herself. She was looking around restlessly, and finding something by the roadside, she headed toward it—

I knew it! Without hesitation, I fired the attack spell I had chanted—"Freeze Arrow!"

"Hmph! Of all places to choose, you picked one right next to this! Bad luck for you!" Naga said, chanting a spell!

"Wh.....?"

"A trap?"

Over a dozen arrows of cold air rained down around Naga! At the sudden attack spell, Naga cried out, stopped in her tracks, and looked up at me!

"Hey, Lina! What do you think you're doing?!"

I descended, cancelled the spell, and said, "Calm down. This is a trap."

At my words, even Naga knitted her brows.

"I'm probably right," I said, looking toward where Naga had been heading earlier. A small leather bag sat alone by the roadside. Gold coins peeked out from its slightly open mouth. Shifting my gaze, I saw three or four lamp lights coming toward us from further down the street. They were undoubtedly the guards.

In a voice only Naga could hear, I said, "That leather bag was probably something the culprit stole from somewhere today. If you had carelessly picked it up, the guards would have rushed

in right then, and you would have been suspected. In other words, the fake was trying to pin the crime on you."

The light of battle entered Naga's eyes. "I see. She's doing something quite interesting, isn't she.....!"

"Well, anyway, we've learned a lot from this." Saying that, I waved to the approaching guards. "Over here—! There was a strange woman just now... and when I attacked with a spell, she dropped something and left!"

I went all out appealing our position as allies.

The next day, before noon. Naga and I visited the female guard, Helen. I called her out saying I had something to say about the case, and we moved to a suitable eatery.

"I have an idea who the culprit is."

"Is that true?"

We sat at the table and finished ordering. I spoke the moment I opened my mouth. Naga and Helen leaned forward and asked, "Who is it!"

I remained composed and said, "Calm down. I'll explain in order. About five days ago, we caught a woman who seemed to be the culprit. However, the woman's appearance differed from the eyewitness testimony, and even though the woman was caught, another notice arrived and an incident occurred. .....I haven't heard the details, but was money stolen from somewhere yesterday after all?"

When I asked just to be sure, Helen nodded. "Yes. A single bag of gold coins from a certain merchant house. It seems the victim noticed only this morning. I heard that it was Lina and her partner who recovered the gold coins from the thief... so, did you see the culprit's face then?!"

When asked, I shook my head left and right and said, "Unfortunately, I didn't see it. However, the possibilities have been narrowed down. Either the woman caught before wasn't the culprit, or else..."

Whether it was because of the daytime or just the fact that it was dark and seen from a distance, I knew it would be hard to tell the difference. Even with that high-pitched laughter, if someone used a falsetto, it would be difficult to notice a change in voice. The memory of a witness usually only retains strong, striking characteristics—like a strange outfit or a piercing laugh.

"That's why," I explained, "the culprit can hide their true form while simultaneously making people believe different individuals are the same person. While one person is committing the

crime, another accomplice stays with unrelated people to establish an alibi. Then, they switch roles and do it again. I bet they've been dodging the investigation by repeating this cycle."

"So there are multiple culprits?" Helen asked, looking bewildered by my theory.

"Multiple!" Naga and Helen chimed in together. Helen nodded seriously.

"But last time," Helen countered, "they went through the trouble of making a time-delayed mechanism to draw attention away to a distant location, didn't they? If there were multiple people, couldn't an accomplice have just caused a scene somewhere else without all that fuss?"

I shook my index finger at her off-base opinion. *Tsk, tsk, tsk*. "What are you talking about? The culprit's features are a cape, long hair, revealing clothes, and a large chest. But those are all things that can be faked with padding or wigs. If they did what you suggested, people would realize immediately that there's more than one of them. The point of that gimmick wasn't just to distract the guards; above all, it was to make everyone believe the culprit was a single person."

Just as I finished my explanation, the waitress brought our orders. We waited for her to place the drinks and leave. I took a sip of my raspberry juice and continued.

"My gut tells me the girl we caught before isn't innocent. If so, she must have shed her disguise while we were chasing her and hidden the gear in a pre-arranged spot. Then, an accomplice must have retrieved it before the guards found it. That was likely the plan."

As we had discussed, the two of us had been keeping watch from the roof of the government office... yet the culprit left the stolen money right under the office, laughed loudly, and walked away. I watched Helen. She didn't change her expression at all. Either she was a great actress, or she still didn't realize what I was about to say.

"However," I continued, "there's a necessary condition for setting a trap for us. Why do it? It's simple. By drawing both us and the guards to the spot where the stolen goods were, they intended to frame us. If they succeeded, we—who were getting in their way—would be arrested, and the girl caught previously would look innocent. That was the goal. Of course, we didn't fall for it."

"I see," Helen said, taking a sip of her black tea.

"The culprit, or culprits, had to know we were waiting on top of the government office."

"That's true," Helen replied without a hint of agitation.

Her calm attitude made alarm bells ring in my head. Was she composed because she was prepared... or did she have another scheme? Regardless, I made my declaration.

"I told you beforehand, didn't I, Helen? That we'd be waiting on the roof. But I didn't tell anyone else. At that point in time, you were the only one who knew we were there. Which means, Helen, you are a member of the bandit gang!"

"Wha—!?"

Naga let out a cry of surprise, and for some reason, Helen screamed, "Eeeeeeeeeek!?" as well.

"Wait, me, an accomplice to thieves? That's... that's lady-discrimination! Just because I'm a woman, you're looking down on me!"

Naga directed a hostile glare at Helen, who flailed about.

"I had to be as detailed as possible so everyone would believe me... and Lina actually caught a woman who might be the culprit. When that happens, it's only human nature to want to brag a little, right?"

"How does the conversation turn into that!?" I yelled at the top of my lungs.

Wait. Hold on. I stared her down. As I just explained, you were the only one I told. I didn't tell anyone else. Or are you telling me, Helen, that despite being a guard, you've been blabbing every detail of the investigation all over the place?

"Well, yes, I did talk," she said plainly.

[...]

She said it so casually that I was momentarily confused. "You talked!?"

I raised my voice instinctively. She pulled back slightly.

"I mean... I was scheduled to get the credit for catching the culprit with your help, Lina. When I told people I was about to get credit, they all laughed at me. They said it was impossible for me. But in this case, it feels like the discrimination isn't against women, but against Helen specifically..."

Actually, it felt more like an accurate evaluation than discrimination. I stood up from my chair and pointed a finger straight at her.

"In the first place! Why is a guard leaking investigation info to the outside!?"

"Don't say it like it's a bad thing..."

"Of course it's a bad thing!"

"Eh... but, I've always done it that way..."

"Since way back!?" I screamed.

I see. So that's how it is. Of course, there was a chance her words were just a convenient excuse. But if the reason the culprits hadn't been caught until now—aside from their methods—was because the guards' investigation status was leaking everywhere...

"That's it!" I stood up. The threads were finally connecting.

If what Helen was saying was true, the trail hadn't gone cold. If the information was leaking to everyone, then anyone could have trapped Naga and me. No, no, no! That's not it. The information was too specific. If so, someone in the gang must have heard Helen's story directly, not through second-hand gossip.

In other words, Helen had definitely crossed paths with the culprits!

"Helen, has anyone listened to your stories in extreme detail? Or has the woman we caught before shown her face in a place where you'd tell those stories?"

She thought for a moment. "Actually, I feel like I've seen her a few times at my regular tavern, the Mountain Dove..."

After finishing our preparations and meetings, we arrived in front of the tavern shortly after noon. A sign with a brightly colored dove hung next to the entrance. According to the talk, the place was run by a landlady named Holly. She lived alone and was currently managing the shop with part-time help because her husband was missing. The tavern had many female customers, and Helen was a regular. She claimed she had seen the woman we caught there before.

I put my hand on the doorknob. But...

"It's locked."

"It doesn't open until evening," Helen said from behind me. "But I think she's in. The shop is also her residence. Let's go around to the back."

Led by Helen, we went through an alley to the rear of the shop. Helen knocked on a small door.

"Excuse me! It's Helen Weaver from the First Guard! I'm here because I have something to ask! Ms. Holly, are you there? Excuse me!"

She kept calling out for a while. Eventually, a woman's voice answered from inside. Footsteps approached, and the door opened with a click. A woman who looked more gaunt than slender peeked out. At a glance, she looked to be around thirty. If she changed out of her plain dress and let down her pinned-up black hair, she might have looked a bit younger.

"Oh, a customer. What do you need?" Holly put on a business-like smile upon seeing Helen.

"Actually, I'd like to talk about the series of thefts that have been happening. May we come in?"

At the mention of the "thefts," I didn't miss the slight twitch in Holly's eyes.

"I don't mind, but... who are the people behind you?"

"They're helping with the investigation."

"Ah. The ones you mentioned before. In that case, please come in."

Holly opened the door wide and invited us in. We entered one by one, passing through the back of the kitchen. Liquor and various ingredients were packed into the cramped space.

"We have a pretty good idea who the culprit is," I muttered, looking around.

Holly kept her back turned. "Is that so? Well, we shouldn't stand around talking in the kitchen. Please, come into the shop area. It’s before opening, so I’m still cleaning."

She led us through the kitchen into the main area. Chairs were flipped up on the tables, and while a few windows were cracked open, the room was dim without lights. Holly pulled down chairs from a nearby table for us.

"About the theft case..." Holly started. "The one with the female thief in that strange outfit?"

Helen nodded, and I took over the conversation. "It seems there isn't just one culprit, but several."

"Several... you say? Women in those strange outfits?" Holly asked as she finished setting the chairs.

I sat down, Helen sat next to me, and Holly sat across from us.

"Yes. Of course, it seems they only disguise themselves during the crimes. And we caught one woman who seems to be part of the group, and she apparently frequents this shop."

"In my shop!?" Holly cried out, but her surprise felt incredibly staged.

"Actually, it's not just that. We have evidence that other members of the theft ring were using this shop to hand over stolen goods and exchange disguise equipment."

I watched the landlady with a meaningful gaze.

"That... such a thing happened here!? If that's true, it's terrible!" Her eyes wavered slightly.

I gave a small smile. "Well, this is quite sudden, so I'm sure you're shocked. So shocked that you haven't even noticed why our other companion didn't come over here."

Holly's eyes snapped around at my words. Yes, only Helen and I were sitting at the table.

"Where is the other one?"

"Heh. She had a little errand to run."

Answering Holly's voice, Naga emerged from the kitchen. In her hand, she gripped something black.

"Thanks to that, I found this," Naga said, holding the black object up for all to see.

A black cape and a black outfit that was practically underwear.

"Now, according to our deal, you'd better pay up that reward fee handsomely! ♪"

Creek! Holly stood up abruptly, her chair rattling.

"Wh... where did you...!?" Her face went pale as she screamed.

"It was in the kitchen, of course! You must have had an accomplice hide it there."

Taking advantage of the moment, Holly spun on her heel and made a mad dash for the entrance! It was as good as a confession that she was the culprit!

"I won't let you get away!" I chased after her immediately! But as she ran, Holly knocked down the chairs resting on the tables!

"Ugh...!"

A classic stalling tactic, but it wasn't meaningless. As I moved forward while being careful of my footing, Holly unlocked the door and burst outside. I quickly chanted a spell—*Ray Wing*!

Crash!

"Ngyah!"

Holly flipped the table in front of her toward us! I jumped back instinctively, but right beside me—Helen was hit directly and screamed!

I burst out after her with Naga! Helen followed slightly behind. I saw Holly’s back further down the street! And then!

"Levitation!"

The one who chanted the high-speed flight spell wasn't me, it was Naga! Cloaked in a wind barrier, she charged straight at Holly from behind! At the very moment it looked like she would hit her, Holly’s form vanished from that spot!

"Levitation!"

Naga used the high-speed flight spell to soar into the sky! Helen was left behind, but such is life! On the rooftops, it was Naga versus Holly. Naga lunged, and then Holly dodged!

With this spell being so difficult to control, it was nearly impossible to hit such a nimble opponent. However, Naga didn't give up and repeated her charges no matter how many times she was evaded!

Whether there was a presence and sound of the approaching wind, Holly sensed something closing in from behind and leaped at the moment she was about to be caught!

Unbelievable.

I doubted my own eyes for a moment. I wouldn't say it's impossible to use a wind barrier as a stepping stone, but it’s certainly no easy feat.

Holly, the thief, leaped off Naga’s wind barrier and landed on the roof of a nearby house! Her agility was top-tier! Naga realized this, controlled her spell, and gave chase!

And there, I appeared too.

Thinking it was disadvantageous to stay on the roof, Holly leaped down into a narrow alley! Naga and I exchanged nods and landed at each end of the alley! All right, we've got her sandwiched!

The back alley was dim and narrow. Her path blocked, Holly groaned.

"Move it!"

With a shout, Holly charged toward Naga! But Naga didn't move! Holly flashed a knife in her right hand—*Clang!*

Naga’s kick easily sent the knife flying from Holly’s right hand!

"Nha...!?"

Holly jumped back in a panic.

"Hmph! Did you really think you could escape, Holly! You might have thought you were being clever, but you can't escape my eyes!"

"Don't make me laugh!"

She barked in a raspy voice, and in the sunless alley, a silver blade glinted dully. Holly looked back and forth between Naga and me, but eventually fixed her gaze on Naga. She must have judged that the unarmed Naga was an easier target than me with my short sword.

Holly drew another knife from her pocket!

"Ohohohoho! It seems you've finally realized who I am! Then let me tell you one thing! Compared to Lina’s kicks, your speed and sharpness are nothing at all!"

At the sound of that high-pitched laughter, Holly’s back shivered. "That laugh... it’s definitely...!"

"Ohohohoho! If you want to say that, say it! If you're going to resent something, resent your own cowardice for turning pale and running away over something like that!"

".....Wh..... Don't mess with me.....!"

Filled with intense rage, Holly thrust her right hand into her pocket again—and that was as far as it went.

Freeze Arrow!

The burst of cold I released from behind instantly encased Holly in ice! She had been so heated by Naga’s words that she completely forgot about me behind her.

"Helen! Over here! Anyway, take this woman to the station."

I waved and signaled to the female guard who appeared at the end of the street.

"Yes!"

Answering energetically, she dragged Holly away, disappearing toward the other side of the street.

"Did you catch her?" Helen asked as she reached us, out of breath.

"As you can see."

Naga stood with her legs shoulder-width apart, hands on her hips, and chest puffed out.

"Her fleeing speed was decent, but her attacks were quite pathetic!"

Of course, this was my plan. I had peeked into the kitchen earlier, confirmed her reaction to the "stolen goods," and if she had seemed uninvolved, I intended to clear the suspicion and ask for her cooperation.

"So... you set me up?"

"Exactly. You're the one who fell for it!"

I said this and looked down. Her clothes were different from the usual ones, but that was her true form!

It was too late to notice now. Yes, those capes and clothes were Naga’s own, which we had stopped at the inn to grab before coming here.

And so, the thief who had imitated Naga was captured.

I handed one end of the rope I had used to tie her up to Helen. "Here. As promised, the credit is yours. I don't know how many accomplices they have in total, but if you interrogate her properly, you should be able to catch them all like pulling up a vine of potatoes."

Helen’s eyes grew misty as she tightly gripped the rope. "...Thank you...! Lina...! With this, I can finally spit back every bit of contempt those fools gave me for being a woman!"

She spat out a line I didn't quite understand.

"Let's go!"

"Roger!"

Naga and I dashed off at full speed simultaneously! The stolen treasure was probably hidden inside that shop! We had to inspect and "confiscate" it before the other guards arrived!

"There's bound to be an underground cellar under the guise of food storage!"

"It certainly looks like the type to hide things! Move a mountain of potatoes in a barrel, and underneath it’s packed with gold coins!"

"But don't confiscate everything! Leave enough to be decisive evidence that Holly is the culprit!"

We ran through the streets toward Holly's shop! We rounded the corner—and there it was, already packed with guards.

"Whoa!"

Naga and I skidded to a halt! One of the guards noticed us and called out.

"Oh! It’s you two! I heard from Helen. You helped look for the culprit, didn't you!"

".....Uhm, well....."

"That's..... fine, but....."

"Why..... are you here.....?"

We asked while trembling on the ground, and the guard looked at us curiously.

"Why? I just got word from Helen a moment ago. She said she found the thieves' hideout, so she asked us to take care of it while she chased the fleeing thief herself."

I see. Before she even caught up to us, that woman had already contacted her fellow guards.

"So what happened to Helen and the thief?"

When asked, I replied in a thin voice, ".....She caught the thief..... and should be heading to the station....."

"I see! Then it’s finally solved. Good, good! Hahaha!"

For Naga and me, we couldn't exactly tell them to move so we could skim off the stolen goods.

".....That's good."

".....Indeed."

And so, while face-down on the ground, we could only whisper weakly. The theft cases by the group imitating Naga’s appearance were solved.

Apparently, Holly was the mastermind; she had seen a woman in a strange outfit laughing loudly in some town before and came up with the idea. When they traced the accomplices, it ranged from shop ladies to local girls, and even a young lady from a noble family. In the end, the gang reportedly consisted of nearly twenty people.

Helen’s status shot up thanks to that achievement! She had intended to quit being a guard, but she felt so good about it that she decided to continue for a while longer.

.....I didn't really care about that part..... The reward Helen gave us wasn't a bad amount.

Well, conversely, it was *only* a "not bad" amount..... Naga and I never did get to confiscate the thieves' treasure. In the end, Naga and I left Tremad City feeling somewhat dejected.

(End of It Can’t be Called a Copycat)

Close Contact! Gathering of Dulahans

"I'm not a bad Dullahan. So please don't bully me."

The voice came from inside the shop.

One afternoon at a cafe terrace. I was spending a peaceful moment sipping juice with honey. The sunlight was warm and cozy, and somewhere children were playing happily.

I looked around. A woman I recognized, with long black hair, a black cape, spiked shoulder guards, and a skull necklace—tightly revealing clothes! For some reason, she was cradling an iron helmet in both hands and wandering about restlessly.

Our eyes met. They really met.....

I wanted to run... away from this place immediately.....

But even if I dashed away, she would definitely chase me. If that was the case, it would just be a waste of stamina. I decided to stay put and acted as if nothing happened, bringing my juice cup to my lips.

The juice that should have been delicious suddenly had no taste.

After a pause that felt eternally long—but was actually only two or three sips of juice—she spoke.

"Ohohohoho! What a coincidence to meet in a place like this! Lina Inverse!"

Naga the Serpent, my self-proclaimed rival! She had probably come around through the street and entered through the back door; she was breathing heavily as she strode over and sat in the seat across from me without even asking.

".....I picked this up, what do you think I should do with it.....?"

She placed the iron helmet she was cradling on the table with a *thump*, looking troubled. I looked at it. It was a full-face helmet that covered the entire face. A rather simple type with decorative spikes on the top. It was simple, but the craftsmanship was careful. It was dirty

and scratched, but the quality wasn't bad. If sold, it would probably fetch enough to eat for several days.

"And? What about it, Naga?"

When I asked, Naga uncharacteristically hesitated, casting a look at the helmet as if she wanted to say something. This state continued for a while.

I... well. What should I do?

A Dullahan. A Ghost Knight. A type of what are called those who are dead yet not dead, appearing as a headless armored knight. There are many kinds—some ride chariots, some ride headless horses, some have no head, and some carry their head under their arm—but they all share one thing: they point at the living and pronounce their death.

If no measures are taken, the pronouncement eventually comes true, but now that magical research has progressed, there are ways to avoid it. The common theory is that a knight who dies leaving behind an intense grudge becomes a Dullahan, but the tone of this self-proclaimed Dullahan didn't feel like someone holding a grudge.....

Even after ruminating on information about Dullahans in my head, no answer came to me.Reluctantly, I decided to act like the adult in the room. I let out a deep sigh, ignored the helmet for a moment, and stared at Naga.

".....Put it back where you found it."

"Ehhhhh?!"

Naga and the dullahan both harmonized in their accusatory shouting.

"This isn't a joke! To get this away from those kids, I went out of my way to buy them candy! I have to at least break even!" Naga yelled.

"Throwing me away is cruel! If you keep being so mean, I'll point my finger at you!" the dullahan added.

The two non-humans ranted at me in turns.

"No. Even if you criticize me... how did things even end up like this?"

At my question, the dullahan (just the head) spoke first. "I'm Hans, a dullahan. Actually, I got separated from my body. Some kids found me and were playing with me like a soccer ball when this person—Naga, was it?—saved me."

"Hmph! Can't you tell just by looking? I saw kids kicking a helmet around, and according to his story, it happened yesterday. There was a 'South Lartigue Region Dullahan Status Improvement Rally' held in the mountains near town."

I immediately cut him off at those words. Hans raised his voice in a slightly offended tone.

"Still, you aren't scared of me even though I'm a dullahan. Neither of you."

"......Well, yeah..." I gave a hollow reply to Hans, who for some reason sounded a bit disappointed. The world was much more full of the supernatural and the absurd than ordinary people thought. And Naga, standing right in front of me, was a prime example of that.

"I'm willing to help if there's a reward, but if you don't know how to say thanks, then I don't know where your body is either. Goodbye—that's all I'd have to say."

Of course, I said I'd help if there was a reward, but I had absolutely no intention of tag-along on a body hunt for a dullahan.

"Wait a second! My body's sword has a sapphire embedded in the hilt. If you find my body, I'll give you that as a reward!"

"Ehh?!"

"What?!"

Naga and I shouted at the same time, but our nuances were different. Naga's was a cry of joy at having a profit dangled in front of her; mine was pure shock that a dullahan would possess such a thing.

"Hold on! A sword with a sapphire? Aren't you just a spiritual entity partially materialized as a dullahan? If so, the moment I take it off the sword, the sapphire might just vanish into the astral side or something... and I'm really not in the mood for that kind of punchline."

"Ah, that's fine. I can materialize with a horse and everything, but I'm a low-ranking dullahan. I'm basically a Living Mail. The jewel is a real jewel."

"I see... so you're like a suit of armor."

The moment I muttered that, Hans yelled out in anger. "Don't lump me in with Living Mails!"

"Whatever. Fine, I get it."

I nodded and continued, "I understand. If that's the case, maybe we can talk. Anyway, I haven't heard many stories about dullahans hiding treasure. This was just my way of politely

turning you down, but... the stares from the staff and other customers are starting to get painful, so let's move locations for now."

I was so used to being around Naga that it made talking to just a dullahan's head feel like an ordinary occurrence.

I finished the rest of my juice in one gulp. "So... Hans, was it? Can you really provide a reward?"

The vacant lot on the edge of town was overgrown with knee-high grass, with several large stones scattered about. Naga and I sat facing each other on two of those stones, placing Hans's head face-up on the ground between us. This way, the helmet was hidden in the grass from passersby, making it look like Naga and I were just two people chatting in a field.

"A reward?" I nodded at his echoed words. "Yes. A reward. I don't know the circumstances of how you got separated, but you're looking for your body. Neither Naga nor I have any obligation to help you for nothing. But... to put it the other way, if you can offer a reward worth the effort of finding your body, I might lend a hand."

"Really! Thank you!"

"Hmph! If that's the case, I, the White Serpent Naga, shall surely lend you my strength!" Naga shouted. If I wasn't careful, she'd settle the deal on her own.

"Wait a minute!" I hurriedly called for a stop. "Do you have any clues? I can't stay with you forever looking for a body. You have to understand that."

"Ah... I guess that's true. I understand." The dullahan gave a reluctant but accepting answer.

Naga was already eager. Fine. For now, I'd listen to the story. If there were no clues, I'd refuse. At worst, I'd help a little and then pull out when the time was right.

"Then I'll start by telling you what happened," Hans began to recount his tale.

"See, lately, human magical research has progressed, so we dullahans aren't feared much anymore, right? I heard we used to be treated like Reapers, but now people can just dispel the Curse of the Death Sentence, can't they?"

"Well, yeah," I nodded.

There were generally two ways to escape a dullahan's death sentence. One was to destroy the dullahan who cast the curse or help them move on to the afterlife. The other was to dispel

the curse itself. In the past, finding and destroying the specific dullahan was difficult, and the latter option was considered impossible.

However, with modern magical technology, finding a dullahan through astral-side searching and blasting them with an attack spell made for a fairly simple resolution. Even more reliable was having the Mages' Guild dispel it. While it cost a far-from-cheap amount, the curse could be lifted through a ritual lasting several days. It was still a troublesome curse, but compared to the old days, it was a fact that they were much easier to deal with.

"And so, our treatment as dullahans has become pretty light. Plus, our character overlaps with Living Mails."

"They both look like armor, certainly," Naga added.

A Living Mail was—well, without needing much explanation—a spirit inhabiting armor or something created by magic. Since they were just armor, they did share a similar image with dullahans. The only difference was whether they had a head attached or not, and whether they pointed at people to sentence them to death. To put it bluntly, it came down to the vibe.

"I basically get the gist of the situation. So, what about the rally?"

"Well, we have periodic meetings to discuss what to do about that. This one was last night. In a clearing in the mountains."

"I wanted to be treated with a bit more... dignity, you know. At first, we came up with plans to strengthen our 'pointing movement,' but then people argued that if we overdo it, we'll just get seriously hunted down. From there, it turned into the usual bickering, and before we knew it, it devolved into a drinking bout."

"A drinking bout!" Naga and I harmonized our voices.\

Dullahans, who are fundamentally restless spirits, shouldn't be able to get drunk.

"Yeah. I mean, we don't actually get drunk. But many death knights have memories or sensations of drinking from when they were alive, so when we 'douse' ourselves in alcohol, those feelings of being drunk and happy come back."

"I see..."

"Then the party tricks started, and I got all woozy in that atmosphere... and when I came to today, I was just a head rolling around at the foot of the mountain. I called for my body, but it didn't come, and I don't know where it is. This is the first time this has happened. I was

panicking when those kids picked me up and played with me like a ball, and that's when you saved me."

A drinking party for dullahans... part of me wanted to see it, and part of me really didn't.

"Anyway. How about we go to the place where you held the rally? Maybe your body is just lying there normally."

If we found the body that easily and got the jewel, it would be easy pocket money.

"Oh, Naga, you carry Hans's head since you brought him. Also, Hans, even if we find your body, don't point at us. And don't forget the reward jewel."

"Hmph. Fine," Naga said.

"Yeah, I know," Hans replied.

And so, the search for the dullahan's body began.

A thin mist hung in the air. We were surrounded by withered trees and tangled vines, the atmosphere thick with an eerie chill.

"A little to the right. Yeah. Straight ahead."

Guided by Hans's head, which Naga carried like a lantern, we entered the mountains near the town. We arrived at the rally site. For some reason, there were no trees there, and the ground was flat, making it suitable for a gathering.

The mist limited our vision, but it was clear enough to see across the meeting area. It was large enough for several dozen people to move around. However, the surrounding withered trees, vines, and damp leaves, combined with the mist blocking the sunlight, felt more bleak than open.

Naga looked around. "I don't care what you say, this doesn't feel like a place for a 'cheerful' drinking bout."

"That's why it's good. People rarely come near here." Hans swayed as he hung from Naga's hand. "Because of this mist, the townspeople at the foot of the mountain call it a cursed place."

"Don't say that so cheerfully," I muttered, scanning the area. "Right. Well, let's take a quick look around. Maybe it's in the shade of a tree."

Naga nodded, and the two of us began walking around randomly. We were looking for a dullahan's body—not exactly something small enough to hide easily. Plus, the area was relatively open. If it were here, we should have found it immediately. Naga and I circled the rally site in opposite directions and met back up.

".....It’s not here."

"Indeed."

"No way! Look harder!" Hans's voice was half-sobbing.

"Even if you tell us to look harder... anyone can see it's not in this area. It's possible it just walked off somewhere far away..."

"Then find it! Please! Find it! I'll give you another jewel!"

"Another one!" Naga's voice jumped an octave. "Hmph! If that's the case, I, the White Serpent Naga, will definitely find your body! Ho-ho-ho-ho!"

Likely completely oblivious to the fact that she wouldn't get paid if we didn't find it, Naga puffed out her chest and let out a stupid laugh.

"---Shh!" I put a finger to my lips, cutting off her laugh, and listened intently.

I heard it. A sound. Breaking the silence was the sound of footsteps treading on wet leaves and the clinking of metal against metal. Hans started to speak—

"---Is that voice Hans?"

A heavy voice came from the same direction as the sound. We all turned. There, emerging from the mist toward us, was a single shadow.

"My body!"

"Ah! Rahard!"

The shadow approached. Its form became clear. But the reason its silhouette looked slightly distorted wasn't my imagination. It was a figure in full plate armor. However, there was no head upon its shoulders. Instead, it was cradling a full-face helmet under its left arm.

A dullahan!

Naga and I instinctively braced ourselves. The approaching dullahan also stopped.

"Mm...! Humans?"

A thread of tension stretched tight through the mist.
I sighed as I looked at the scene before me. Hans, or rather, Hans's head, was calling out in a friendly voice to the Dullahan standing in our way. He called him Rahard—so they were acquaintances?

"Wait! Don't fight!" Hans pleaded. "He's become a Dullahan because of his lingering grudges against this world, but he's actually a straightforward, good guy! These people are Naga-san and Lina-san! My body actually went missing, and I'm having them look for it! So Rahard, please don't fight or point your fingers at them!"

Hearing this, the Dullahan named Rahard lowered his guard. "Hmph. If that is the case... I myself do not care for pointless finger-pointing. If those humans have no hostility, I have no intention of fighting, either." He began walking toward us.

".....Fine, then. I don't plan on going out of my way to rumble with you, either," I muttered. Being told that a spirit knight born of grudges was a "good person" didn't sit entirely right with me, but then again, considering Hans himself acted nothing like a typical Dullahan, I suppose it was possible. I kept my guard up, but I let the tension leave my shoulders.

Naga, however, did the exact opposite. She pointed a finger—*shing!*—straight at Rahard as he stopped nearby. "If you know where Hans's body is, you'd better speak up for your own sake!"

Rahard fell silent for a moment before asking, ".....Hey, Hans? You're *really* sure these humans aren't hostile? I feel like I'm being picked on here."

"Yeah, it's fine. Don't mind her," Hans reassured him. "Aside from her outfit and her attitude, she's a good person!"

Naga knit her brows slightly at Hans's explanation. ".....That's a rather backhanded compliment."

Actually, I don't think he was complimenting you at all, I thought.

Whether he was satisfied with the explanation or had simply given up on understanding, Rahard spoke. "......Very well. Regardless, I do not know the location of Hans's body. I only saw him during the gathering the other day."

"......No way....." Hans let out a pathetic groan.

Rahard sighed. "Hans, weren't you performing your usual party trick at the gathering? Perhaps you got separated from your body then."

"What! I was doing that trick again? I was so drunk I don't remember any of it... but if I was, then maybe that's when it happened..."

"Party trick?" I asked. "What kind of trick was it?" Naga followed up.

Rahard looked a bit hesitant to explain. ".....Ugh..... whenever Hans drinks, he always does the same thing. He hangs his helmet from a fastener on his back, crouches down, and starts fumbling around the ground with his hands, crying, 'My head! My head!'"

"How lame!" Naga and I shouted in unison.

"It's not lame! It was a huge hit!" Hans protested indignantly.

I looked at Rahard to see if it had actually been a hit. He gave a small, metallic shrug of his shoulders. "It is true that some were laughing. After all, alcohol was involved. When people are that drunk, they'll laugh at a rolling bottle."

That made sense. "Setting aside Hans's sense of humor," I said, "if there are no leads, how about asking the other Dullahans who gathered then?"

"Hmm... is that the only way?" Hans wavered.

"—Wait a second!" I interjected. "Going around to all those scattered Dullahans to question them one by one... that'll take forever! I'm sorry, but I really can't commit to that!"

"Hmph! Does that mean you're dropping out of this case? Lina! In that case, both gems belong to me, right?" Naga's eyes sparkled as she jumped to the conclusion that my quitting meant a bigger share for her. I took note of her greed, but didn't do much else about it.

"Of course, if Naga wants to stick with Hans until the next gathering to find his body, that's her choice," I said with a shrug. "But I'm telling you, if it's going to take a long time, I'm out."

I was about to wrap things up when Rahard spoke up. "Wait. You are rushing things too much."

"What do you mean?"

Rahard walked across the clearing. "No one said anything about wandering the lands or waiting a long time. We simply need to hold another gathering."

"How?" I asked.

As I questioned him, Rahard walked toward the trees. He pressed his palm against one tree, then walked to another.

"I am the one entrusted with managing this gathering ground," he explained. "If a meeting is required, I notify everyone and call them." He pressed his hand against another tree, then headed for yet another. "This is a place where certain ley lines and spiritual pulses converge. It is possible to send word to everyone."

He repeated this several times before coming to the center of the clearing. He snapped the helmet he'd been holding under his left arm back onto his shoulders. Then, he drew the longsword from his hip, raising it high above his head with both hands.

From his mouth—or rather, from his bodiless form—came a sound that was like a spell, yet not a spell. At the same moment, I noticed something. The trees he had touched began to rustle all at once.

Rahard plunged the tip of his raised sword deep into the earth! *Whoosh!* A sound like rushing wind echoed. It didn't even ruffle a single strand of my hair, yet it scattered the swirling mist in all directions, punching holes in the fog overhead.

Several beams of sunlight—if my memory served, they hit every tree Rahard had touched—shone through like something out of a religious painting.

"I see. A signal using the astral side to tell the other Dullahans to assemble?" I nodded at Rahard. "Well, I am a mage. But this is a bit different from what they teach at the Mage's Guild."

"I will not teach you the method," Rahard said.

"Tch. Stingy." I pouted. After our brief exchange, Rahard turned back to us. "By tonight, most of them should be here, though perhaps not everyone."

"Tonight? That fast?" Naga's eyes went wide.

"Most of us are pure spiritual entities. Distance has no meaning. However, if one is using an object as a vessel, like Hans, they are affected by distance. Even so, the gathering was only last night. Even if they have to turn back now, they will be here before dawn. There is no need to wait long. So? What will you humans do? Will you leave it to me, or will you show your faces at the night gathering? If you come, I will tell them not to harm you."

Naga and I looked at each other. She turned to Hans. "Hans, if your body is found during this gathering, what happens to the reward gems?"

"Um... well..." Hans thought for a moment. "Yeah, I'll still give them to you. You listened to my story and brought me this far, after all. But... if my body isn't found even then... I won't be able to give you a reward, so I guess I'll just have to give up."

Hearing him sound so earnest, I couldn't just abandon him, whether out of compassion or self-interest. "............Well, if that’s the case."

"Hmph. Fine. I suppose I can participate in tonight's gathering," Naga agreed.

"Then it is settled," Rahard said, pointing to the sky. "Return to town, eat, and rest. I will look after Hans in the meantime. Come back to this place tonight." As he spoke, Rahard’s form turned into white mist and dissolved into the wind.

A thin moon hung in the sky. The mountains were hushed in the night breeze, and the magical light I had cast on a branch barely illuminated our surroundings. Once in a while, a night bird would cry.

Naga and I had gone back to the town at the foot of the mountain, eaten, and taken a nap at an inn. We left town just as the sky was staining with the colors of sunset. We hiked back into the mountains, and soon the sun went down and the stars came out.

The mountain felt completely different at night than it did during the day. As we walked through the pathless woods, my logic told me we were going the right way, but a tiny voice of anxiety whispered that we might be lost. Eventually, the scenery began to turn a faint, smoky white. The thin mist reflecting our light told me we were on the right track.

"Lina." "Yeah."

We exchanged brief words. Up ahead, through the fog, a faint light appeared. We wove through withered trees and vines toward it.

"You've come," a voice greeted us. It was Rahard.

In the clearing we had visited during the day, several will-o'-the-wisps were flickering, dyeing the night with a pale blue glow. Rahard stood in front of us, and Hans’s helmet was placed on the ground near his feet. And then...

"Oho." "So these are the ones." "Point your fingers!" "Now, now."

Lined up in the gathering place were about ten Dullahans, their headless forms standing in a row. It was a crowded gathering of undead knights! Since I couldn't use expressions like "showing their faces" or "sticking their necks out," I had to settle for calling it a "close-knit" meeting.

"A few more haven't arrived yet," Rahard said, tilting his helmet under his arm—his version of looking around. "Though, I suppose Dune-san isn't here yet, either."

Technically, since Naga falls into the category of "strange creature" biologically, I was the only normal human there. Around me were numerous shadows—neither living nor dead—ghostly knights who had sealed their delusions into suits of armor. Their appearances varied; some wore red capes, one held a lance, and another remained mounted on a horse. Counting Hans and Rahard, there were twelve in total.

"Dune?" I asked.

Hans's voice brightened. "Yeah! He's the one who rides a chariot pulled by two headless horses! He's so cool! Last time, Dune-san arrived before everyone else, so I didn't get to see the chariot. I hope I can see it today!"

I felt a bit of a twitch in my cheek under their eerie stares, but I forced a smile. "Well, there's no point in waiting for someone who might not show up. So, what now? Shall we start, or wait a bit longer?"

"I've kept you waiting." Rahard began to address the group.

Naga, as usual, was unfazed. "Is this everyone?"

"No, not everyone," Rahard replied. "But if we wait for everyone to be here, we'll likely just start drinking again. It's better to get to the business at hand first." He turned to the assembled Dullahans. "Let me explain again. After last night's gathering, one of the attendees, Hans, lost his body. As some of you know, Hans is a Dullahan inhabiting a physical suit of armor. Losing that body is a major crisis that shakes his very identity."

"True, you can't even point a finger with just a head," another Dullahan remarked.

"But it does mean we don't have to listen to Hans's lame party jokes anymore," someone else added.

"Thinking about it that way, maybe things are better like this."

"My jokes aren't lame! And I'm really in trouble here, so take this seriously!" Hans shouted at his heckling comrades.

"Regardless of Hans's jokes," Rahard said, tightening the atmosphere, "we cannot just leave it like this. These two humans brought Hans's head here and have offered to help search for his body."

"Only as much as we're able," I clarified, just to be safe.

Rahard continued. "Though we are trapped by our grudges in death, we were once knights. We cannot turn our backs on those who have helped our kin. That is why I told you not to point your fingers. That is the gist of it. We've gathered you to see if anyone knows where Hans's body might be."

If they hadn't been Dullahans, they would have all shaken their heads in unison. "............No." "I don't know." "No idea." "I was drunk, after all."

The responses were all negative. Hans let out a deeply disappointed sound. Even Rahard sounded dejected. "No leads, then?"

They were giving up way too easily. "Then I'd like to ask," I spoke up in their place. "I get that there's no 'decisive' sighting of Hans's body walking off somewhere. But did anyone notice *anything*? Even something really small. Something that felt just a little bit different than usual?"

The Dullahans groaned for a moment. Then one said, "Now that you mention it... it's really something minor, but..."

"Can you tell us?" I encouraged them.

"Fine. Yesterday, Hans... his jokes didn't have their usual 'edge' because he was so drunk."

Wow, that really is useless. But if I said that, the others would stop talking. So I just nodded. We continued like that for a while until a distant sound echoed from deep within the mist. It was the sound of hooves and the creaking of wheels—like a carriage.

"I see. Hans wasn't his usual self. That might be a clue," I said, trying to keep the conversation going. "Does anyone else have anything?"

Encouraged by how small the previous "clue" was, the other Dullahans started chiming in with all sorts of things. I listened to them... but nothing seemed like a real lead. Sometimes unrelated things *can* be clues, but I really didn't think Hans's preference for cats over dogs had anything to do with this. It was becoming more of a chat than an investigation.

If I didn't pay attention, even Naga would start chatting about how to put whisked eggs into soup.

Suddenly, a shadow emerged from the thin mist. Steel wheels slid over the earth, leaving no ruts in the fallen leaves—a total rejection of the ground they traveled on. The chariot was pulled by two headless black horses. Standing in that small, moving fortress was a lone figure. A black cloak, like the night itself, fluttered behind him, and his armor gleamed in the light of the will-o'-the-wisps. In his right arm, he held a sword far larger than himself. In his left, he held his own head.

The chariot swerved and came to a sharp stop at the edge of the clearing. Iron spikes on the chariot's body looked ready to tear apart anyone who came near.

"Ooh," the Dullahans marveled. It was, I had to admit, pretty cool.

So this was the chariot-driving Dullahan they had mentioned. The one called Dune stepped off the chariot, his feet leaving prints in the dead leaves as he approached.

Rahard gave him the same explanation he'd given the others. Dune listened, then said, "I see. I understand the situation. However, I have no idea where Hans's body is either."

".....I see..... nothing, huh....." Hans sounded defeated.

I, however, looked at Dune with a face full of curiosity, as if I'd forgotten all about Hans. "That chariot is so cool! Regardless of whether you're human or a Dullahan, I honestly think so."

"Thank you. The chariot is my pride. It feels good to be praised." As I expected, he wasn't displeased.

"The chariot and the horses... it must take incredible mental strength to manifest all of that, right?"

"Indeed. I don't mean to boast, but I have confidence that the quality and quantity of the grudges I hold are second to none."

"Well, that's not exactly something to brag about," I teased with a smile. "But that means... if your spirit was damaged for some reason and your power weakened, you wouldn't have enough strength to manifest everything?"

The knight fell silent for a moment. ".....That would be the case."

"I thought so." My smile widened. "And that's why you stole Hans's body."

A painful silence fell over the misty clearing.

"Wait, Lina! What are you talking about?" Naga was the first to break the silence, but her question triggered the others.

"Wh... What does that mean!" "How rude to say that without proof!" "Dune-san isn't the kind of person who would do that!"

I ignored the accusations and looked calmly at Dune. "If I'm wrong, I'll apologize. But answer me this: why didn't the chariot wheels leave any marks on the ground, but your feet leave clear footprints now that you're walking?"

A small groan escaped someone. It was true—from where Dune had stepped off the chariot to where he stood now, his footprints were clearly pressed into the leaves.

The Dullahans fell silent as they looked at the ground.

"If the chariot, the horses, and the armor are all manifested by your spirit, then either both should leave marks or neither should, right? Usually. But you only leave footprints. So I thought about it. Maybe the armor has actual physical weight? I heard that during yesterday's gathering, you arrived before anyone else. And I imagined... maybe you were damaged in a fight and couldn't manifest your body, chariot, and horses all at once. If you took over Hans's armor, that would explain why he doesn't know where his body is."

I looked Dune right in the eye. "It's all just a theory. But you have footprints. You were here early yesterday. And today, you were late, even though distance shouldn't matter to a spirit. I think you were too proud to show everyone a weakened chariot, so you came early to hide it. Then you saw Hans's body and head get separated while he was drunk. You realized that if you inhabited a physical suit of armor, you'd save enough spiritual energy to manifest the rest. If you didn't steal it, then prove it—release your manifestation right now. If you aren't wearing physical armor, you should be able to, right?"

"Very well," Dune said.

But instead of releasing his form, Dune hopped back onto his chariot. Without another word, he snapped the reins and the chariot bolted into the woods!

"He's running away!" "What...!" "Eh! Then Dune-san really did it!?"

Rahard and Hans shouted in surprise while the other Dullahans buzzed with confusion.

"Ho ho ho! Running away is as good as a confession! After him!" Naga's voice rang out, sounding exactly like her usual self.

"Got it!"

Naga and I chanted our spells together. "Ray Wing!" Enveloped in a barrier of wind, we tore through the mist and took to the sky. Dune had already vanished into the fog, but I knew which way he went.

Just then, I noticed the mist around us began to swirl unnaturally.

I remembered Rahard. He was the one managing the assembly hall. In fact, he had used the ley lines or spiritual veins to signal the Dullahan. If it was within this vicinity, it shouldn't have been impossible for him to track Dune's location or control the mist. With this—I could catch

up! Just as I thought that, the blackness ahead came to a halt. Had he given up, or was it an ambush?

Naga and I bypassed the shadow from the left and right, circled around, landed in front, and canceled our spells. Standing on the earth to face him, the opponent atop the chariot looked a size or two larger than us. However, Naga and I weren't the type to flinch at sheer visual scale.

"Hmph! This is as far as you go, Dune! Stop your useless resistance and quietly return Hans's body!"

Dune ignored Naga's declaration. "Move. If you intend to block my path, I shall remove you by force."

This was the path of mist Rahard had created to lead us! There was no reason to hesitate. Naga and I poured in our spirit, increased our speed, and raced through the mist. Before long, a single black shadow appeared floating on the other side of the parted fog. Normally, a mountain at night would be pitch black. But perhaps Rahard was doing something; the mist itself emitted a faint light. Emerging against that white—no, the darkness cutting through it was unmistakably Dune’s trailing cloak!

In his right arm, he held the same greatsword from the start. I caught up! The opponent noticed us, as his handling of the reins grew more intense. However, perhaps because he was carrying the foreign object that was Hans’s armor, his speed was by no means fast.

So, he had resolved to intercept us. A normal person would have flinched and cleared the way at the mere shimmer of that blade. But I didn’t move an inch. Letting the mist fill my cloak, I spoke slowly. "The reason you lost part of your power was because you fought someone, wasn't it? I don't know what you fought, but if you think Naga and I are easier to handle than that opponent, you’d better think again. You wouldn't want to lose more than what you've already lost, right?"

The chariot and horses faded and vanished. Dune, his armor clanking, stood majestically upon the earth. An indomitable fighting spirit welled up and rose from his form. "No intention of retreating?"

"And no intention of quietly returning the body, I see."

The words exchanged were a confirmation of the breakdown of negotiations. "I thank you for your concern for my fellow kinsman, Hans. Therefore, I have no intention of taking your lives, but this may hurt a bit. Forgive me."

"Don't worry about it." I'd be using attack spells. I couldn't hold back, so if things went south, it wouldn't end with just 'hurting,' but bear with me. Oh, and Naga—keeping my eyes on Dune,

I spoke to Naga beside me. "I’m sure you know this, but don't go using any reckless spells. You'll end up blowing away Hans's body too."

Naga abruptly stopped the spell she had been about to chant. "Hmph. I know that even without you telling me." She replied and began chanting a different spell. ...This girl... she definitely didn't realize it. I wondered what kind of spell she had been planning to unleash if I hadn't warned her.

At any rate, I began chanting my spell as well. During that time, Dune did not move. Was he waiting for us? How chivalrous! Finally, Naga and I finished our chants.

"It seems you are ready. Then, here I come!" Dune bellowed and charged toward us!

"Elmekia Lance!" Naga unleashed her spell at the charging Dune. It was a spell that dealt direct damage to the opponent's spirit. If a living human took it, they’d just be bedridden for a while, but for a Dullahan, an undead, it could be a fatal blow. But before that strike could reach him, Dune’s blade flashed!

His target wasn't me or Naga. The tip of the greatsword easily pierced the earth. If he thinned his existence to a level close to a spirit, the sword would pass through without gouging the earth and sink easily into the ground. At the same moment he vanished, a surge of enmity erupted from where Dune had been. I spun on my heel again and saw light approaching in a horizontal sweep!

I wasn't particularly surprised by that itself. The sword was also something Dune had manifested. "It’s the sword!" I replied instantly to Naga’s grumbling. Of course, that was what I thought. At that moment—the ground exploded! Something like numerous tentacles splashed soil and rose from deep underground. Naga’s strike was blocked by the erupting earth and tentacles, ultimately failing to reach Dune.

No—looking closely at what seemed like tentacles for a split second, they were countless branching tree roots! "Hey! What is that!?"

Well, yes. Just now, what had swept over our heads from a great distance was Dune’s sword, stretched incredibly long. Emerging above the ground, beyond the now-immobile tree roots, the blade that had extended to an impossible length at the tip of the hilt Dune held was rapidly returning to its original size. He could manipulate something like that!

"A sword...?" Behind me as I thought that, I felt a presence. I turned around instantly to see a headless black horse charging toward us! "Just dodge it!" I barked and cast my next spell. "Elmekia Lance!"

I blasted the same spell Naga had used at the approaching horse. But just before it hit, the black horse vanished! Length could be adjusted freely. Then, it had likely passed through the

surrounding trees without cutting them, meaning it probably had no physical attack power. Even so, if I took a direct hit, I'd likely take damage to my spirit.

However, the bigger problem than the sword was Dune's method of attack. Manipulating tree roots and making a headless horse appear behind us. Just what and how did he do to enable this kind of attack style? If I couldn't see through it, things would get a bit difficult. As long as Dune had taken in the physical entity of Hans's body, he shouldn't be able to appear and disappear as a complete spirit... wait. Could it be that Dune's attack method—

Shadows appeared to the left and right. Two headless horses were flanking Naga and me! They were charging toward us! Naga completed her spell slightly faster than I did. She was using the same spell as before. Just as Naga was about to unleash it toward one of the horses—
"Elmekia Lance!"

I tripped Naga and pushed her back with my arm! Losing her balance, Naga fired her blast into the ground! Instantly!

"Gwaaaah!?" Dune's cry of pain echoed! I knew it! I followed up by releasing my spell into the ground as well. "Elmekia Lance!"

In that split second, the two horses vanished. Dune staggered slightly some distance away.
"I've seen through your tactics," I declared quietly.

"Hey, what's the meaning of this?" Naga's question was either about me tripping her or wanting an explanation of Dune's tactics. Either way, I spoke.

"You extend your spirit body into the ground. Sometimes you possess tree roots for a moment to move them and use them as a shield, releasing the possession just before an attack hits. Sometimes you let your spiritual terminals surface from the ground to materialize horses. But you're always connected somewhere. That's why you took a heavy blow from the shot Naga fired at the ground. ...I don't know how much of a blow it was, though."

Hearing this, Naga broke into a smile, confident of victory. I turned to Dune. "Now that I've figured out your trick, I don't think there's any chance left for you to win, is there?"

"I think not. Even if I am always connected somewhere, you have no way of clearly seeing through where that connection is. Earlier, I was merely grazed by a strike by sheer bad luck, but it was no great blow."

At his bluff, I gave a blatant sigh. "...What are you talking about? No matter how you stretch or what shape you take, as long as you are controlling Hans's armor, you are always right there. To circumvent that premise, you'd have to discard the armor... but if you release Hans's armor, the reason for fighting vanishes in the first place."

".....Then I simply must not let you target this armor. As you saw through, if I possess tree roots and use them as a shield, I myself will take no damage."

Dune barked back, refusing to admit defeat, but this time Naga's laughter rang out! "Ho-ho-ho-ho! To think you could manage with just that, you're quite naive, Dune!" Pointing sharply at the opponent, she continued. "I'll tell you something good. I can also use wide-area purification spells. Which meeeeeans—if I cast a spell centered on the armor, your only options are to discard the armor or be purified!"

".....I see....." The atmosphere surrounding Dune changed. From enmity to clear murderous intent. "To break through, I must not hold back. It seems I have no choice but to defeat you." He slightly adjusted his sword stance.

"...So you have no intention of giving up..." I groaned. As expected, I had to take him down. Once our spells were unleashed, it would be over for Dune. Then, the moment Dune would strike was the moment we began chanting.

A brief silence and a standoff. It served to confirm that each other's resolve was immovable. Just as Naga and I inhaled—Dune's sword—

"—Wait!"

The voice that stopped both sides' movements was Hans's. The sound of approaching hooves echoed. Before long, emerging from the depths of the faintly glowing mist was an armored knight astride a white horse made of mist. It was Rahard, holding his own helmet on his neck as he did in life, and cradling Hans's helmet in his left hand.

No, they weren't the only ones. Surrounding us, one after another, about ten Dullahans appeared—some in single-horse chariots, others on foot.

"—Are you taking the side of the living—" Dune muttered, sounding either resigned or exasperated. But then, Hans's voice rang out.

"Dune-san! Stop it already! You can have my armor!"

"—What...?" Everyone present cried out in surprise. Everyone except Hans himself, who had said it.

"...Ha... Hans... do you realize what you are saying...?" Dune asked in a raspy voice. Hans replied calmly.

"I've always admired your chariot, Dune-san. I thought it was so cool. I don't know what happened, but I don't want to not be able to see that anymore. So, I'll give you my armor. I'll give it to you, so please, stop fighting."

"But... then what will become of you...? Without a body, you won't be able to move." Dune asked, stunned.

"Hmm. That would be a problem. Well then, I'll give you the armor, so how about you carry this helmet of mine with you always? Then I could ride in your chariot, and I'd be happy. But, I want you to give the jewels on the sword that came with the armor to Lina-san and Naga-san. That much should be fine, right?"

Being told that so casually, Dune clanked his armor and knelt. "...Hans... it is my defeat..." With a sigh, he bowed his head toward Hans.

"Eh? Eh?" As Hans looked on in confusion, Dune spoke his remorse.

"The chariot and horses were my pride... but some time ago, I fought a certain swordsman[2], and after taking a blow from a magic sword, I lost part of my power... and I felt that was a disgrace. I agonized over what to do... and then, just as the sorceress pointed out, on a whim I took in the armor of the drunken Hans... but... Hans's selfless words have finally made me realize. How shameful my actions were, obsessing over my appearance. To steal a comrade's armor is a more shameful act than losing a chariot or horses—why did I not realize this until now...? Hans. Forgive me. Please, I beg your forgiveness." He lowered his head—no, his upper body.

"Th-that's not true! Dune-san, there's nothing to apologize for!" Hans grew flustered instead at the apology.

Watching this, Rahard nodded slightly, just enough so his head wouldn't fall off. "Then, Hans—no, Master Hans's armor is transferred to Master Dune. In exchange, Master Dune will always carry Master Hans's helmet. The jewels of the sword are transferred to Mistress Lina and Mistress Naga. Is this acceptable?"

"Yup! It's fine!" Hans replied instantly.

"If Master Hans says it is fine, then it is an unexpected blessing for me as well." Dune couldn't complain either. And of course...

"Well, as long as I get what was promised." "Hmph. I certainly have no complaints." Naga and I nodded as well. Thus, the case of Hans's missing body was somehow settled peacefully.

Then, one by one, the Dullahans vanished from the misty clearing. Only four shadows remained at the end. Me, Naga, Rahard, and... the armored figure in the two-horse chariot. The only difference from when we first arrived at the assembly hall was that the helmet he cradled in his left arm was Hans's.

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[2] This is obviously Gourry

"...I caused you trouble," the armored figure said in Dune’s voice, looking down at us from the chariot.

"Thank you. You really helped me out," Hans’s voice came from the helmet.

"Think nothing of it."

"Hmph. You should be grateful for the good fortune of meeting me, Naga the White Serpent!"

Promised jewels in hand, the matter was settled. "...By the way, what happened to Dune’s original head?" At my question, Dune replied.

"It would be strange to carry two heads. I have chosen not to manifest my own head, and the power saved from that has been diverted to detailed decorations."

"...I see." Come to think of it, various small ornaments and such had increased here and there.

"Well then. Farewell!" With those words, Dune flicked the reins and drove the chariot away.

"Whoa—! So fast, so fast!" Hans’s cheerful voice faded into the depths of the mist.

"Then I shall take my leave as well. Take care on your way back to town." Leaving those words, Rahard vanished too. Perhaps as his own way of thanking us, the mist remained faintly glowing and parted to the left and right, forming a path to lead us back to town.

In the end, I noticed something but didn't say it. Since no one else seemed to have noticed, I felt like saying it would only cause more trouble. In this whole affair, though it seemed like Hans had given his armor away, if I thought about it coolly, since both the armor and the helmet belonged to Hans, wasn't it more like Hans had gained Dune as a vehicle?

Walking along the misty night road, I offered a silent prayer that Dune would never realize that.

(End: Close Contact! Gathering of Dulahans)

Magical Old Woman Princia

The commotion started even before the Council Chairman could open his mouth. Rough footsteps, someone's angry shouting. Eventually, the sound of something breaking.

"Could it be?" The voice the Chairman raised was filled with surprise and, for some reason, a tinge of exhaustion.

I had stopped by the Sorcerers' Guild in Malthas City, a relatively large town I was passing through. I had been told by the Chairman, Mark Richum, that he had a consultation for me, and was led to this Chairman's office on the top floor—

The Chairman was probably in his mid-forties. He was a serious-looking man with blond hair, medium build, and dressed in a navy blue robe, but now a look of confusion was deep on his face.

"What is it?" I asked, but the Chairman remained behind his desk with a troubled face. "Mmm... how should I put it..." He muttered vaguely, his eyes wavering, but he showed no sign of getting up to check the situation.

In other words, he knew what was happening and was hesitating whether to tell me. As I hesitated whether to press him further, the sounds of approaching footsteps and an opening door echoed.

"Chairman! Ma—" The sorcerer who burst in cut off his words upon seeing me.

Council Chairman Richum's reaction was a single gloomy word: "...I know..." He muttered, "It’s about time."

"What's going on?" I asked, and the Chairman turned his eyes toward me. "...There’s no use hiding it. Right now, a certain individual is trying to make off with our Guild’s supplies."

"Trying to make off...? Wait, this isn't the time to be so calm!" I stood up instinctively, but the Chairman didn't change his tone.

"Calm down. The reason I called you, and no one else, is precisely regarding this matter. However, the request is not to protect the supplies that are about to be taken, but to recover what has been taken. Lina Inverse."

Further confused by the nonsensical explanation, I wondered what to ask as the Chairman stood up and began walking. "Well then, I'm sorry, but would you come with me, Lina?"

"...Eh..." Still not understanding, I followed him obediently. The sounds of the commotion hadn't subsided yet.

"There was a girl," Council Chairman Richum began, his back still turned as we passed through the open door. Looking at him from behind, his blond hair was quite mixed with gray, perhaps from the stress.

"Sia Primelint. At less than ten years old, she had mastered the basics and applications of spells, and later announced several research papers—"

"So, she's someone from a long time ago?" I asked, realizing that the noise had vanished.

"Long ago—I suppose you could say that. She is none other than the Chairman before the last one here. Although she has retired from the front lines, she is still in good health, and occasionally comes by like this—"

As we spoke, we reached the first floor of the Guild. Several sorcerers were there, some fallen, some slumped over, some standing dazed, looking toward the entrance. Doors everywhere were flung open, and furniture and books were scattered about.

"Making off... with things...?" I blurted out.

"To her, this Guild is something she built herself—like her own child, to put it positively. But because of that, she seems to have a tendency to think of it as her own... even now that she's retired, she continues various research at home. But... occasionally she appears out of the blue like this and takes expensive magical medicines or grimoires with the same casualness as one might borrow seasonings from a neighbor. Grimoires are sometimes returned after a while... but some are kept, and as for magical medicines, they have never once been returned. Of course, we are indebted to her, and there are parts where we cannot hold our heads high... but having the Guild's supplies taken so frequently is truly problematic."

"So it’s a pattern of taking things back?" At my question, the Chairman nodded. "...That’s the pattern."

"I knew it..." She was the type of person who just lets warnings go in one ear and out the other.

The Chairman looked straight at me. "That’s why, Lina, to show that we are truly troubled, I want to borrow your strength. I want you to lend me a hand."

I finally understood the explanation. "I see."

If he didn't want to be seen as a bad guy, nothing would be resolved. It would only result in her coming back another day to take more. That’s why. By having an outsider like me and an insider like the Chairman go together to ask for the return of the lent items, we would appeal that we were truly troubled. Plus, although I was a sorcerer, I was dressed for a fight, with shoulder guards and a short sword at my waist. I’d be perfect for a bluff. I was basically just an escort.

"If that’s the case, I’ll help you," I said, nodding readily.

The large garden was well-maintained, with green plants and flowers shining in the sun. Council Chairman Richum, who had guided me, stopped in front of such a house. He took a small breath and said, "This is it."

"Eh?" I frowned at his words. The former Chairman’s name was supposed to be Sia Primelint. But the gate of the house in front of me had a heart-shaped pink nameplate, with "Princia☆" written in rounded yellow letters.

"...But the name is different, isn't it?" I asked, pointing at the nameplate. The Chairman looked away. "...It’s a nickname..."

"A nickname?" Just as a bad feeling shivered down my spine—

"You're here again, Mark!" A strangely high-pitched voice rang out!

Looking up, a single shadow stood tall atop the green roof! A red pointed hat and a red cloak! A pink vest and a white skirt with frills! Each edge had gold thread decorative stitching! A small white animal was on the shoulder! The wand in hand was pink, red, and yellow!

But the one wearing those clothes was, no matter how anyone looked at it, a seventy or eighty-year-old grandmother! Her platinum blond hair wasn't silver hair... no, that was definitely gray hair! I twisted my neck and looked at the Chairman. "...What is that mysterious creature...?"

At my question, the Chairman shifted his gaze away. "...That’s why... well... former Chairman Primelint..."

I knew she was a problematic person because she took Guild items without permission, but... the direction of the problem was different from what I expected. If a child wore that, it would be cute, but this was... tough.

"Lina."

I poked the Chairman with my elbow and said in a small voice, "Look. There’s no point in staying silent, talk, talk." But the Chairman only groaned, "Ugh..."

Well, I understood the feeling of being speechless in front of someone you're not good with. For example, if I had to go to my sister in my hometown to complain—I would probably be speechless too. ...Or rather, I might choose death.

The woman on the roof twirled her wand and spun around with her arms wide. "I hate being called by that name. Besides, 'former Chairman' isn't cute at all. Call me the Magical Chairman Princia☆!"

I twisted my neck again and looked at the Chairman. "Chairman."

"It’s not my fault, I didn't raise her," he muttered, staring only at the ground.

"Anyway, stop sulking and tell her the business!"

While we were standing there groaning, the object—the former Council Chairman Princia Prime-Lint... actually, Princia is fine—pointed a pink wand at us and called the current Chairman by his first name.

"I see! I've figured it out, Mark! You’ve come to steal what I brought with me again, haven't you, without learning your lesson! ☆"

Steal what she brought. What kind of phrasing was that?

"But Princia-chan, who is that standing next to Mark?" a voice followed her statement, which showed a complete lack of self-awareness.

I thought I saw a furball bouncing on the shoulder of that pink old woman. I felt my neck stiffen.

"I’ll explain before you ask," Chairman Richum spoke up first this time. "The thing on her shoulder is an artificial lifeform she created long ago. It was already there when I became a mage. I believe its name is... Tota-Tota. As you can see, it has intelligence and speaks human language."

I was speechless at the explanation. To have enough intelligence to converse at that size, and to be long-lived as well! Even though I wasn't very familiar with the field of biological creation, I knew that the pink old woman who created such a thing possessed abilities worthy of being called a genius.

...Well, the phrase *a waste of talent* did cross my mind.

"I see! I get it!" Princia shouted, paying no mind to our circumstances or exhaustion. "You’re a wicked mage hired by Mark!"

"Alright! If that's the case, let’s give her a lesson, Princia-chan!"

Silence fell for a moment. Then, shortly after:

"Heart Smash! ♪"

She let out a nonsensical cry and gave her wand a swing. Simultaneously, a heart-shaped light was born and came fluttering toward us. My instincts screamed at that languid action!

The Chairman also had his eyes wide and his cheeks twitching as he stared at the scorched ground in front of him, though he seemed uninjured.

That heart-shaped thing... if my assessment was correct, it was a Fireball! It was an attack spell I used often; the released sphere of light would burst and scatter flames the moment it touched something.

Princia had added an arrangement to that spell, making the flying sphere of light heart-shaped! Its power seemed to have dropped considerably because of that, but that didn't mean it should be taken lightly.

The nonsensical scream just before was, of course, a dummy. After shouting it, she lowered her voice and recited the real spell.

"You can see that persuasion is impossible! What do you think I asked for your help for!"

"Eh? I'm not a witness for a discussion, but a force-multiplier?"

Without taking my eyes off Princia's movements, we exchanged rapid-fire words.

"What did you think it was!"

I did think the fee was a bit high for just being a witness. Regardless, if that was the case, there was no point in arguing. Keeping my glare fixed on Princia atop the roof, I spoke to Chairman Richum.

"So the interpretation is that I should take down the former Chairman by force, right? I won't deny it, but don't go overboard. If she ends up bedridden, it'll leave a bad taste in my mouth, and if you blow up the whole house, we won't be able to recover what needs recovering."

"I'll try, but it depends on her. Anyway, I'm going in, so stay here."

Leaving him with those words, I dashed into the gate! Not to be rude, but my opponent was an old lady. I had no intention of underestimating her, but I certainly didn't intend to lose either! As long as I didn't get careless, I should have been able to handle anything.

I held my hand high and raised my voice! Approaching the house with a dash, I chanted a spell under my breath.

At that moment, Princia raised the wand in her right hand high.

"Rapple-ripple, flower fairy! Lend me your strength! Rapple-rimple!"

I figured the real spell would follow in a whisper, but I expected to reach the house first! That was my read, but then!

"Watch out!"

It was Chairman Richum's voice from behind! I felt something move for an instant at the edge of my vision on the left, and at the same time, I jumped hard to the opposite side, the right!

As I jumped, I glanced to the left and saw countless writhing whips! No, a rose hedge? I thought I just had to escape the reach of the vines!

"Rapple-ripple-primple! Flower spirit! Lend me your strength!"

"But if you were going to use force, you should have stopped her when she came to the Association!"

"If she went on a rampage in a place like that, the damage would have been huge!"

Wait, could this be—!

"should I stop her now?!"

"Watch out!"

I screamed, shoved Chairman Ritchum aside, and leaped sideways myself!

"Rapple Ripple Prin-pull!"

A heart-shaped light hit the spot where we had been. The strange creature egged her on in a shrill, raspy voice. I had been feeling drained by how idiotic it all was, but if I hadn't dodged, that might have finished me.

"Yeah! Here I goooo!"

Princia raised the wand in her right hand once, twirled it skillfully for her age, and—

KABOOM!

She let out a cry that sounded somewhat like a spell and scattered crimson flames, scorching the ground in front of the gate! Thanks to my evasion, I was unscathed.

"She dodged it, Princia-chan!"

"Yeah. I know."

Responding to Tota-Tota's frantic words, Princia regripped her wand. I hurriedly turned to the Chairman.

"H-Hey! Chairman! Don't just sit there shivering, say something! Persuade her! Persuade her!"

"I'm Lina! Lina Inverse!"

"Lina...?"

Princia gasped slightly at the mention of my name. It seemed she had heard the rumors about me. One of the many green hedges unraveled, becoming countless thorny whips. Another weird cry from Princia! The hedge to my front-right unraveled into whips and lunged to ensnare me!

"What's this 'poor little flowers' business!"

"Who's a wicked mage!"

"I don't know your name!"

You just modified these roses or whatever with magic to use them as guard dogs! I wouldn't die from being caught, but I had no desire to experience the pain of those thorns.

"It's the flowers that are pitiful!"

Just as I suspected. She was shaken by my words.

I was forced to leap backward to escape. To someone ignorant of magic, it might look like she was controlling flowers with sorcery.

"Rapple Ripple Prin-pull! Flower Spirits! Lend me your strength!"

Nonsense like that "Prin-pull" sleep-talk wouldn't cause such a phenomenon. The hedge I was retreating toward began to writhe! But I hadn't just been running. My chant was complete! I fired it at one of the hedges!

"Freeze Arrow!"

The unravelling hedge froze instantly upon contact with my cold-air spell!

"Ah! Princia-chan! The flowers!"

"How could you do such a horrible thing! Poor flowers..."

"Shut up!"

Stopping in a spot where I could settle my footing, I shouted back at Tota-Tota and Princia as they blathered on.

"If you love your magical plants so much, you should just fight me directly!"

"It's a trap, Princia-chan! Don't go!"

"I know, Tota-Tota! But at this rate, the flowers... I'll do it, I'll fight that person!"

In response to my provocation, the furball and the pink lady were busy creating their own little drama. She pointed her wand at me.

"Here I come, Miss Wicked Mage!"

She nodded slightly. "Then... here I come! Miss *Very* Wicked Mage!"

The 'wickedness' rank went up!

But this was no time for quips. I had already started my next spell.

"Rapple Ripple Prin-pull! Fall softly! Ta-dah!"

With a weird cry, Princia kicked off the roof and soared into the air! She jumped down! Of course, the cry was just a cry. In my mind, I pictured Princia hitting the ground in the next instant and passing out. But—

"Rapple Ripple Prin-pull! Feet, be fast!"

The speed of her pink descent slowed, and she landed softly and gracefully!

"Gooooo!"

I dodged the ice arrows she released at the signal and dashed toward the gate! I couldn't recklessly charge while the rose-like hedges were near her. I was forced to stay where I was and hurry my spell—

"Freeze Arrow!"

I released over a dozen shafts of ice! This should freeze the hedges and, if things went well, stop Princia’s movements! But!

"Rapple Ripple Prin-pull! Wind, protect me!"

A sudden gust of wind occurring simultaneously with her sleep-talk blew away every single one of my ice arrows!

What!

It was a wind-gust spell—similar to "Damp Voe," but of course, it wasn't something that could be triggered by such delusions. Before my shock could fade—

"Rapple Ripple Prin-pull! Rain down, ice!"

Following the sleep-talk, five or six ice arrows appeared in front of Princia!

"Freeze Arrow!"

Now it was ice arrows! I was genuinely shaken by this impossible attack.

"Princia!"

A cry echoed and a presence drew near! Looking up, I saw her almost flying—no, she was definitely using some kind of art. Actually, she was hovering slightly off the ground, heading toward me at high speed! At this rate, she'd catch me before I cleared the gate! In that case!

I drew the short sword at my waist! It was an obvious feint, but she couldn't afford not to be wary. Princia stopped her movement instantly. In that gap, I made it out of the grounds and through the gate!

"She ran away, Princia-chan!"

I heard Tota-Tota's voice from behind. The Chairman, who had been watching from outside the gate, gave me a reproachful look, but—

"We're regrouping!"

I shouted as I ran, and the Chairman hurriedly followed after me. Princia, naturally, showed no signs of chasing us.

Thus, the first round between me and the magical old lady ended in my retreat.

The city streets were the picture of peace. People bustled about with energy, and the voices of stall vendors echoed. It was as if no one knew a strange pink old lady lived in this very city.

I finally stopped at the edge of a street far from Princia's house.

"...Why... are we... running...?"

The first thing out of Chairman Ritchum’s mouth as he caught his breath amidst the afternoon clamor was, as expected, a word of reproach. I answered without hesitation.

"To win next time."

The Chairman’s eyes widened at my answer. "...Can you win?"

"I can raise the probability of winning. At the very least, it's certain that continuing to fight there would have been bad. After all, that place is literally Princia's garden, packed with traps."

At my words, Chairman Ritchum made a complicated expression. "Um, Lina-kun, I'd appreciate it if you stopped calling her by that name; it's embarrassing..."

He said it without a shred of shame, and I let out a sigh.

"...Listen... that line is meaningless unless you say it to Princia herself. If someone had told her that much earlier, things wouldn't have gotten this bad."

At my point, the Chairman looked troubled. "Well, even if you say that... apparently she’s liked dressing like that since she was a child. It just kept dragging on... and by the time she reached an age where that outfit was a bit much, everyone around her was already bowing down to her. Besides, even if someone had warned her, it's doubtful she would have listened."

"...Even so, I think saying nothing is a bit much..."

It's a fact of life that there are people who are quite distant from things like "sound arguments" or "reason." If talking worked, my self-proclaimed rival would have become a decent person a long time ago. And Princia was clearly that type.

The Chairman stared at me. "If her pride were to be broken, perhaps she might reconsider her ways. In any case, Lina-kun, I need you to win against her. I want your honest opinion: what are our chances?"

"...Hmm..."

I thought about it. The amount and type of traps in Princia’s house were an issue, but the most troublesome thing of all was—

"Before I answer, I want to ask, Chairman: do you know how she’s triggering those spells with that nonsense baby-talk?"

As expected, he shook his head. "No. That is a mystery even to us. Members of the Association, including myself, have witnessed the phenomenon, but how she does it..."

I had once tried asking her directly how she did it, but in the end, she never told me. There must be a simple solution, of course... but honestly, I wasn't too keen on finding out. There had even been a ridiculous theory that her mascot, Tota-tota, was chanting the spells for her, but even so, the speed was just too relentless. This was no time to be wavering!

I once asked her directly if she could do it, but in the end, she never told me. There was a simple solution, though I wasn't exactly thrilled about it. Some had joked that perhaps Totato was chanting the spells instead, but even so, the speed was just too relentless.

I had actually experimented once by having some young mages dress in the same outfit and chant the same spells. "Chairman... everyone just ended up depressed for a few days."

"......You actually made them experiment with that thing...?"

The fact that Princia could activate spells at that speed was the biggest problem. If I could do something about that, our chances of winning would go up significantly.
That technique of hers might look pathetic at first glance, but it was actually a massive threat. After all, it was overwhelmingly faster than normal spellcasting. While I could fire off one offensive spell, Princia could fire the same spell two or three times. I couldn't ignore that gap. Furthermore, since I was the one on the offensive, it was difficult to lure her to a more advantageous location. To think I would end up being the one to call that person here.

Even if I waited for Princia to leave and ambushed her outside, it would be pointless if she just fled back to her mansion. And obviously, I couldn't just blow the whole mansion away with a Dragon Slave...

"Fast activation means a high volume of attacks. If that’s the case, I just need to increase my own volume—in other words, compensate by simply increasing the number of people. However, the people from your association are either intimidated by Princia or aren't suited for combat, so they aren't fit for the task."

This was no time for hesitation! I looked up with determination and addressed the Chairman.

"Chairman... honestly, it would be better to hire someone from the outside. Can you provide an additional request fee for that, separate from my own?"

The Chairman thought for a moment before replying, "I'd be in trouble if you called dozens of people, but if it's just a few assistants and the amount is reasonable, I'll manage somehow."

"Understood. In that case—" I gave a single nod and, feeling a bit reluctant, pulled a few silver coins from my pocket. It felt less like an experiment and more like bullying, to be honest.

I tossed the silver coins in my hand onto the ground. They hit with a hard *clink-clink* sound.

"Naga, come here!"

Before the echo of my voice even faded—"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"—with a roar of laughter and a cloud of dust, she appeared before us!

When people encounter something they can't understand, they show various reactions. Some scream and run, some faint. Others might try to erase the existence from their consciousness and memory.

"Did you really just summon her? Can you do such a thing?"

"Of course," I replied instantly to the Chairman's question. When I first arrived in this city, I had spotted her from a distance. I hid immediately, though.

I nodded as I spoke, while the Chairman's reaction was simply to say, "What is that?" It was a fairly reasonable reaction.

"She's a decoy." I gave a firm, unwavering answer to Chairman Richum's stunned murmur.

Naga, who had been preoccupied with picking up the silver coins, didn't seem to have heard me. Tucking the coins into her cleavage, she stood up and finally looked at me. It goes without saying that she had come in response to the sound of the coins and my call.

There she stood! Long black hair, a black cloak, spiked shoulder guards, and a skull necklace! An excessively revealing outfit! She appears if you call her with money! She appears even if you don't! My self-proclaimed rival, the lingering rumor of disaster, Naga the White Serpent!

Her look was certainly a match for the "Magical Old Lady" in terms of sheer intensity. The only reason the Chairman didn't scream or throw stones was undoubtedly because he had grown accustomed to Princia.

Beside me, the Chairman sent me a complicated look. I knew roughly what he wanted to say, but I ignored him and spoke to Naga.

"Oh, Naga, perfect timing. I have a little money-making proposition. You interested in helping out?"

I said it quite naturally. Naga's shoulders twitched. Naturally, she had reacted to the word "money-making." She flipped her cloak and struck a pose with her hands on her hips!

"Well, if you insist, I suppose I could lend you a hand."

Chairman Richum hesitated slightly, but eventually seemed to resign himself to his fate. He began to tell Naga the same story he had told me.

We all stopped in front of a fairy-tale-like house. It was, of course, the house of the pink old lady where the Chairman and I had visited and retreated from earlier. The only difference was that some of the hedges were wilting from my spells, and Naga was now with us. We had already discussed the procedure for what to do next.

Cloaked in a wind barrier, Naga used a high-speed flight spell to soar into the air!

Wait, that wasn't in the plan! As if to provoke Princia, Naga went out of her way to cross the grounds and landed on the roof of the neighboring house.

"Not a bad house at all!"

Naga stood there with her hands on her hips, looking around and declaring it with unnecessary arrogance.

"Naga, I told you before, don't forget that those rose hedges in the garden will attack you!"

I shouted a warning to her.

"Hmph. I know that!"

Naga replied to me, looking down at the opponent. As they spoke, their gazes clashed intensely.

A skylight opened, and a pink object emerged!

"Toh!"

She scrambled onto the pastel-green roof, though she looked rather unsteady despite her energetic shout. She pointed her pink stick at us.

"So, you've come back again, Marc! ...Wait, you brought another person? No matter who comes, this Princia won't lose!"

Beside the Chairman and me, who were silently suffering through that usual routine, Naga alone began to chant a spell.

"Ray Wing!"

Naga took flight! The neighboring roof was higher up, and from a distance, Naga slowly crossed her arms and puffed out her chest.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! So it is you, the one they call Magical Chairman Princia!"

Princia braced herself at the challenge. "And who are you!?"

"Hmph! Remember it well! My name is Naga! Naga the White Serpent!"

As Naga introduced herself with total commitment, the fluff-ball on the old lady's shoulder bounced up and down. "Be careful, Princia-chan! That person looks exactly like a mean rival witch!"

"I know, Tota-tota! That woman... is no ordinary person...!"

The sight of the two facing off was strangely fitting, which I found incredibly annoying. The Chairman and I watched the two of them sparking off each other from their high perches. Or rather...

Without looking at me, the Chairman muttered beside me.

"Oh my Lina-san... that Naga person you called as a helper… wouldn’t it be most appropriate to say that her style bears the same sort of qualities of the former Chairman's?"

Why was he suddenly using such polite, formal speech? I didn't look at him either as I answered.

"Yep♪"

"Don't give me a 'yep'! Don't answer so refreshingly like a spring breeze! What's going to happen to all of this!?"

Unable to take it anymore, the Chairman turned and pressed me for an answer!

Hmph. Getting flustered over something like this just proves his training is insufficient. My own heart, by contrast, was as calm as a windless desert. While basking in a sense of superiority that even I didn't quite understand, I kept my eyes on the freaks on the roof.

"There's a saying, 'Use a poison to overcome a poison,' right?"

The Chairman went silent for a moment after that apt proverb. "There is... but this scene feels more like 'In for a penny, in for a pound'..."

Naga was currently striking a pose that looked like a 'A Mysterious Enemy Appears! What Happens Next?' teaser.

"That's it!" I exclaimed.

"It's not 'That's it!' How could it possibly get any worse!?"

While we were arguing, there was movement above. Suddenly, a dog began barking at the house Naga had climbed onto! Whether it was a stray or a guard dog was unclear. If it was a guard dog, its reaction was a bit slow, but perhaps even a dog needed time to process this situation.

Naga looked down for a split second at the barking dog, then turned her gaze back to Princia.

"Hmph. It seems we've been interrupted! But the next time we meet... be prepared! Ho-ho-ho-ho!"

She chanted a spell under her breath and used the high-speed flight spell again, flying off behind the buildings. Princia remained there, staring at the sky where Naga had disappeared.

Eventually, Naga looped back around from across the street and stopped near us. Wiping the sweat from her forehead with her arm, she gave a refreshed smile.

"Whew."

"Don't give me that 'I did a great job' face!"

Wham! My boot connected squarely with her face! Naga was sent flying and rolled twice, but she immediately scrambled back up and stomped over to me, looking dissatisfied.

"What are you unhappy about!?"

"What part of that were you satisfied with!? Exactly!?"

Beside Naga and I, who were bickering over the request fee, the Council Chairman muttered, "We can reduce the reward, right?"

"No, you cannot."

Our voices and hearts overlapped as one.

"Ready? We're going according to the plan, Naga!"

"Hmph! I know, Lina!"

We firmly crossed our hands.

"—Princia!"

I called out to the pink old lady still on the roof. Without waiting for her to turn and respond, I continued:

"I heard that the Mages' Guild in this town was practically created by you! I can understand that you probably think of the Guild as your own home! But! Even so! There is no law that says you can treat Guild property as your personal belongings! The people at the Guild are seriously troubled because you've taken various items! Today, I'm going to have you return everything you took, all at once!"

At my call, the pink figure on the roof puffed out her cheeks. "Don't talk about me like I'm a villain!"

"You *are* a villain, clearly!"

I threw in a retort to her statement, which showed a complete lack of self-awareness. Though, of course, if she were capable of realizing what she had done with just that, things wouldn't have turned out like this.

"Anyway, let's go, Naga!"

"Hmph! Understood!"

With that, the two of us stepped from the gate into the garden.

"Ice Spear!"

"Rapple Ripple Primple! Float down softly!"

Just like last time, she chanted what sounded like either a spell or baby-talking and jumped from the roof! With her cloak and skirt fluttering, she landed slowly and softly. Witnessing that reality, Naga raised her eyebrows.

"I had heard the stories, but she really is using magic without a spell chant."

"That's the deal! I don't know how she's doing it... but anyway, let's go as planned!"

Naga and I stood ready, chanting our spells. Princia faced us and shouted:

"Rapple Ripple Primple! Once more, legs become fast!"

As she spoke, she floated slightly into the air and accelerated fiercely toward us! While walking slowly and chanting, I fired.

"Ice Arrow!" "Ice Arrow!"

I began freezing the magical plants disguised as rose hedges one after another. Princia, predictably flustered, cried out:

"Don't do mean things to the flowers! I'll be your opponent!"

Naga unleashed a cold-air spell toward Princia.

"Fireball!"

I blasted the attack spell I had chanted. The sphere of light I fired scattered crimson flames upon impact—a fairly vicious attack spell! However, my target wasn't Princia, but one of the hedges I had already frozen. The ice melted and evaporated instantly from the heat, and the resulting explosive smoke and steam made visibility extremely poor.

In this state, she wouldn't be able to move recklessly fast. I continued chanting, stayed low, and ran through the garden.

"Princia-chan, be careful!"

"Eeeh! This much is nothing! ☆"

Amidst the chaos, I heard the voices of the strange creatures. The pinkish shadow, while slowing down slightly, called out:

"Rapple Ripple Primple! Wind, blow!"

I thought she might put up a wind defense, but Princia drew a wake of wind in the empty air, evading everything with movements that could even be called elegant. Her reaction speed was unreasonably high!

Howeveeer!

A sudden gust blew in response to the "baby-talking," scattering the smoke and steam. Visibility cleared up considerably, though not completely. At that moment—

"Freeze Brid!"

Consequently, Naga fired her next spell. Princia easily dodged the flying sphere of light. As I expected, she passed right by the hedge where I was hiding. Now!

"Deim Wind!"

The moment she tried to dodge, I released the spell I had chanted. It was a simple strong wind spell. It could blow away light objects—but that wasn't what I was aiming for!

The wind raged violently between Princia and me. I reflexively pulled back and jumped away. Princia, too, noticed and hurriedly tried to distance herself, but—

The wind burst with a loud sound!

“Uwaah!” “Kyann!”

The voices of the mysterious creature and the old monster echoed. Princia flipped over, her skirt flew up, and inside! I saw a flash of something white, and I reflexively looked away. I leaped out and stretched my hand toward Princia, but my fingers just barely failed to reach!

But this was fine. My plan wasn't just brute force. While Naga and I fought Princia to draw her attention, Council Chairman Riccham was supposed to circle around and sneak into the house to take back the various things that had been stolen. That was the plan. Narrowing the visibility with the Fireball earlier was meant to slow Princia down and make it harder to track the Chairman's movements.

“A mutual interference of spells...?”

Princia's voice as she spat those words lacked her previous composure. I didn't know how she was omitting her spells, but there was no doubt she was using wind spells to move while floating in the air. Therefore, my goal was exactly that: if I jumped into the effective range of her spell and used the same wind magic, either the one with weaker interference would lose, or the spells would interfere with each other and cause something strange to happen, like just now. Either way, I figured I could stop her in her tracks.

“Princia-chan! These people are tough!”

“I know!”

Princia kept a wary eye on Naga and me, raising her cane. At that moment—

Council Chairman Riccham's scream echoed from the direction of Princia's house! Princia and Totatota turned that way as if struck.

“Mark's voice?”

The Chairman had succeeded in entering the house, but the fact that a scream had occurred meant—

I turned on my heel and started running toward the house!

“I won't let you go!”

Princia also turned on her heel—

“Behind you!”

The moment Totatota on her shoulder shouted, Princia's body was blown to the left! A split second later, the cold-air spell Naga fired pierced through that space.

“Hmph! You have some nerve turning your back on Naga the White Serpent! Did you really think I, of all people, would miss that?!”

Listening to the conversation of those non-humans behind my back, I ran for Princia's house. I rushed over in a hurry.

“Hey? Are you okay!?”

The front door was open. Either it was unlocked to begin with, or the Chairman had opened it.

Regardless, the place I entered was a small hall with an open ceiling. Corridors continued to the left, right, and front. Light streaming in from various windows illuminated the building. The Chairman's moans came from the front corridor. Moving that way, I immediately saw a small door facing the hallway left wide open.

Beyond the door was a staircase to the basement. From the end of the many turns leading down, I could see the faint light of magic. Most likely, the Chairman had used it when going down. The stagnant air wafting up was mixed with a chemical-like smell. Was it a basement laboratory, or perhaps a storage room for chemicals?

I descended the stairs to find a passage with two doors facing each other. One was left wide open. I peered inside to see a dim room. There was a cabinet with sliding doors, and the Council Chairman was collapsed there, moaning, buried under a pile of white balls.

“Ugh... Lina-kun... something... collapsed...”

I reached for the pile of balls to move the ones on top, and—

“...Eh?”

I froze, frowning. Those things I thought were balls... so *that* was it...

Just as everything became clear to me—

K-Boom!

“Hyah!”

A distant explosion and Naga's scream. It seemed Princia had defeated Naga. In that case, she would be here shortly. If that’s the case—

“Chairman! Please get up on your own!”

Ignoring the Chairman’s groans of complaint, I turned on my heel and ran back up the stairs toward the ground floor! I passed through the door into the corridor and looked ahead to see the front door wide open. Standing there with the light from outside at her back was a single pink shadow!

The magical old woman, Princia!

Before she could speak, I said, “I'm not in the mood to fight in a cramped place. Let's do this outside.”

Princia directed a searching gaze toward me for a moment, then said, “...Fine.”

She turned and began to walk. I followed after her. Once we passed through the entrance and got outside, I stopped dead. Sensing my presence, Princia turned around.

However—

“The garden behind you, shining so brilliantly green... it's a bit of a shame how it looks now with the frozen hedges and the charred Naga, isn't it? You were just one step away from the right answer.”

She bit her lip and remained silent. She didn't respond to my question, but I continued anyway; she wouldn't be able to argue.

“Do you know the nature of living things? Generally, small creatures are quick but have short lifespans, and big ones are the reverse. That's the norm. But I heard from the Chairman that Tota-tota has lived for a very long time, and I was surprised. A small creature that lives long and even speaks human words... I thought it would be amazing if you had truly created such a being. *If* you had truly created it, that is.”

Princia didn't open her mouth. Neither did the Tota-tota on her shoulder.

“The Chairman and the others said they didn't know how you were omitting your spells. According to them, some jokes even flew around about Tota-tota being the one chanting the spells. But since the spells were cast too fast for that, it seems it just became a funny story. Well, I might not have noticed either if I hadn't seen this.”

I held out the object I was grasping in my right hand toward Princia. It was one of the white balls—or things that looked like balls—that had been burying the Chairman in the basement.

But that ball had hair, and although they were closed, it even had eyes and a mouth. No matter how you looked at it, it was a Tota-tota.

“There wasn't just one Totatota. Besides the one on your shoulder doing the comedy routine, there were many, many Tota-totas that could use magic, and you always had them tucked away somewhere in your clothes.”

Earlier, when Princia was blown away by the strong wind, the white things I caught a glimpse of inside her skirt weren't the old lady's underwear at all—they were the countless Totatotas hidden in the blind spots of her clothing. I had reflexively looked away, so I couldn't confirm their identity at the time, but—

“The Tota-totas other than the one on your shoulder would each chant a spell and stop it just before activation. They were ready to trigger the spell at any time using keywords you chanted.”

That “Ripple Rapple” baby-talk wasn't a spell; it was a keyword to make the magical creatures she created perform an action.

If it was followed by “float down softly,” the hidden Tota-tota that had been chanting a Levitation spell would immediately activate it. I didn't know how many of these things called Tota-tota there were in total, but they had probably been by Princia's side for a long time, being replaced over and over. The Chairman and the others had simply been under the impression that it was a single Tota-tota.

“To speculate further... your maneuvers and evasions during high-speed movement are just too sharp. Maybe the Tota-totas are controlling those, too? Like I said, smaller creatures are better at quick reflections and maneuvers.”

“...To figure all that out just by finding the Tota-totas...”

The words Princia leaked told me that my hypothesis was correct.

“You had the magical plants disguised as hedges attack me. The hedges were acting one by one in response to your calls. And each of your calls was slightly different every time. Even if the 'Flower-san' part was the same, the part after that would be 'Fairy-san' or 'Spirit-san.' That’s when I imagined it—that those weren't spells, but keywords.”

Each hedge had a different keyword, and if I chanted it, the corresponding hedge would start its activity. Princia probably wanted to show as little of her hand as possible while still bluffing.That was why, when I first came, she had blasted us with a heart-shaped fire orb using a spell she chanted herself. Of course I don't think that would be very powerful. So, I didn't flinch, and as a result, she was forced to show her hand bit by bit—the hedges, the Tota-totas.

"It's not hard to imagine that if I know there are lots of Tota-totas, it would be something similar." I figured it was probably that kind of mechanism. Once I understood that—

"But! Just because you saw through the Tota-tota thing, don't think you've won!"
"............Lina Inverse..... I've heard the rumors, but....."
Princia pointed her cane at me and said, "You're even better than I imagined.....
I heard you once received the pink title robes, and I thought we might be a little alike."
"You are fully qualified as my rival magical girl!"

"I don't need such a qualification."

"We aren't alike." I wanted to flatly deny that point. I didn't know if she was even listening to my opinion or not. I shrugged my shoulders. Even though I understood the mechanism, it didn't mean I could slow down the pace at which Princia and the Tota-totas fired their techniques. I looked straight ahead and said,
"It wasn't about seeing through the Tota-tota trick. My victory was in drawing your attention."
With that declaration, before Princia could notice and turn around.

Freeze Arrow! "Ice Arrow!"

The cold spell released by the revived Naga frozen the pink old woman solid, along with the strange creature on her shoulder. The battle was over. Yes. The battle itself. But that didn't mean everything was resolved.

There were four figures in the hall of the house. Naga and I. The rescued Council Chairman, and the tied-up Princia. By the way, I took away all the Tota-totas that Princia had hidden all over her body and locked them in the basement room. As a side note, it turned out the Council Chairman had been buried in the Tota-tota storage room, and that shelf was a magical device for hibernating and preserving the Tota-totas.

Various mysteries were solved for the time being, but— "You're saying you can't return the magical medicine?" The Council Chairman muttered with a twitching face, and Princia turned away with a huff.

"Because. I used it to create the Tota-totas." It was also the Council Chairman who sighed with a look of resignation after a brief silence.

".....Well..... to be honest, I was prepared for this to some extent. It can't be helped....." I gave a secret sigh. If left alone, Princia and the Chairman would likely continue their fruitless argument forever. Persuasion wasn't part of the request, but..... it would be better than being dragged into a pointless argument indefinitely.

"Wait a minute. Bringing the magical medicine meant you were going to use it for something. Don't take it out, no, anyway." I stepped between the two who had started an exchange. "Princia, in short."

"I'll have the association take back the spellbooks. You want to stick to that lifestyle, but from now on, please don't take association supplies without permission."

"No." Immediate answer. Yes. This was the biggest problem. Even if I restrained Princia here, if she just repeated the same thing, it would only be a temporary fix.

"For that, you absolutely need the Tota-totas, and you need the magical medicine periodically. Is that right?"

"Yeah." Princia nodded firmly. Personally, I wanted her to stop that pink lifestyle too, but I knew from hanging around Naga for a while that trying to persuade someone like that was useless. "Then, how about something like this?" I thought.....

"How about making it a joint research project between the Mages' Association and Princia?"
"Joint research?" Princia and the Chairman spoke in harmony. I nodded. "Yeah. Instead of cluttering your house with materials you're finished with, you could leave them with the association. That way you'd have more space in your house, the association people would be grateful, and they'd comfortably provide you with things like magical medicine—which do you think is better?" To my question, Princia blinked a few times. ".....Thinking about it that way, it might not be bad....."

The association would provide Princia with some of the supplies needed for research free of charge. In exchange, Princia would share the unpublished materials and know-how she had cultivated in her research so far in the form of joint research with the Mages' Association.

That murmur was what truly signaled the end of the incident. "Hah—" "Eh—" The Chairman... well, if that was the case... but Princia's reaction was, "Why do I have to do something like that?"—which I had predicted. I cut her off with a growl, and then they'd yield to the association.

And so, after all, she still had a tendency to think the Mages' Association belonged to her. "Let's think about it." But that was exactly why I spoke in a light tone.

The incident of the pink old woman who had needlessly stirred up the Malthus City Mages' Association somehow reached a resolution.

Naga and I successfully received our reward and sat around a dinner table at a restaurant. "But she was a strange old woman, wasn't she?" At Naga's mutter from across the table after we finished ordering, I couldn't help but slump forward.
".....Uhm..... hey..... Naga. Really.....?"

"What, Lina?"
"What do you mean 'really'?" I managed to push myself up with a strained smile and muttered, but Naga just looked at me blankly.

"............No..... but Naga, I’m serious. When you get old, you're definitely going to end up just like her." Something snapped on the other side of the table.

"........Hmph..... Is that so? I certainly don't think so. If anything, I’d say a child who gets all full of herself just because she received a pink robe is much more likely to end up like that in the future, don't you think?"

Twitch. A strange sound echoed from the vicinity of my forehead. I glared at Naga.

"..............Ho ho..... So, are you saying you're picking a fight with me.....?"

"Hmph..... Don't get the wrong idea, Lina Inverse. I wonder which of us picked the fight first?" The sparks flying between our gazes turned up the heat. And so, in the twilight of Malthus City, the flowers of attack spells bloomed.

(Magic Old Woman Princia: End)

Comfortably Pointing

By the time the hazy full moon of the night reached the treetops of a withered tree standing on the hill. I finally found the target I was searching for. Chanting a spell inside. I hid behind a tombstone so decayed that the epitaph was illegible. Against the moon, the black figure on the hill was a chariot pulled by a headless horse.

The lonely figure on the chariot was a knight in steel armor, wearing a cloak the color of the night wind. It could never be a living being. He held his helmet under his left arm, but inside it, above his shoulders, there was nothing.

A Dullahan—a phantom knight. It is said that a knight who leaves behind regrets in this world becomes a spirit, carrying his own head and pointing at the living to pronounce their death.

There are several ways to escape the curse of the pronouncement of death, but the method people often choose is the most straightforward. That is, to defeat the Dullahan itself, the source of the curse, and extinguish the curse.

Yes. Just as I was hired for this extermination. Recently, in this town of Lamy, a Dullahan had been appearing night after night, pointing at people he encountered.

There were guards in the town, but they couldn't defeat a Dullahan with ordinary weapons. Reports had been made to the lord in another city asking for help, but there hadn't even been a reply, let alone a response.

Nearly a month had passed since the Dullahan's appearance, and in a little while, the curse would take effect and people would start dying. At such a time, a beautiful traveling sorceress happened to visit the town—namely me, Lina Inverse—so it was only natural that the request to exterminate the Dullahan came to me.

Knowing the circumstances, I couldn't exactly refuse. I accepted the request and searched the town at night for several days. And today. I finally found the opponent I should defeat in this cemetery on the outskirts of town.

My chances of winning were high. I knew several techniques to destroy a Dullahan, which ordinary weapons didn't work against. The curse would also vanish on the spot.

However, it was true that it would be a nuisance if he pointed at me and then immediately ran away. Therefore, the plan was to launch a preemptive strike and kill him with one hit before he noticed me!

I hid and wove a spell—but before it was finished! "—Who is it. Who's there?" A heavy voice echoed in the night. It was undoubtedly uttered by the dead knight standing on the hill! Tsk! Did he notice me?! It couldn't be helped. While continuing to chant the spell under my breath, I put on a frightened expression and peeked out from behind the tombstone.

It was a tactic to lower his guard by pretending to be a victim who was late in escaping. Moreover, even if I were pointed at, the death curse didn't work immediately. Usually, death occurs about a month after being cursed. In other words, if I immediately blasted the opponent with an attack spell, it would be fine.

But— "Huh? Could it be Miss Lina?" But then. The carefree third voice that rose up was a familiar one. This voice— "Hans!"

I instinctively interrupted my spell, called out the name of the voice's owner, and stood up. A while ago. I had received a strange request from Hans, a Dullahan who was just a helmet, to find his lost body.

He was the type of Dullahan who possessed physical armor and a helmet, and while investigating various things, it turned out that his body had been secretly stolen by his fellow Dullahan, Dune.

After various events, they ended up sharing the body between Hans and Dune. Thinking back, that first voice of inquiry was definitely Dune's voice.

"Hans..... and Dune?"

"Long time no see."

"You helped us out before." The two gave their greetings in turn.

—But then, who on earth was the Dullahan that had been threatening this whole area recently... Before I could question the unpleasant possibility that came to mind, Dune spoke to me. "Is your objective also the Dullahan that appears around here, Miss Lina?"

"Also?" I frowned at the curious phrasing."You mean there's another Dullahan besides you two, and you're looking for it too?"

"Yeah. That's right," Hans said easily. I see. For a moment, the worst possibility—that Dune and Hans were the ones ravaging the area—had crossed my mind, but apparently that wasn't the case.

But if the two of them were looking for that other Dullahan, it might become a bit complicated. ".....So? What do you plan to do when you find that Dullahan?" To my question, asked in a stiff tone, Dune replied with a hint of a bitter smile.

"Don't be so guarded. I know that fellow is going around pointing at people in this area, but well..., we have no intention of taking part in that. No, on the contrary, we came to stop him. You're doing the same, aren't you, Miss Lina?"

"In that case, we can cooperate on this matter."

In truth, I wanted to find and finish off the target before Dune and his companion could, but despite his predictable answer, my expression remained grim. It seemed I needed to clear something up first. But as I was wondering how to phrase it to keep things civil...

There were almost no lights in the town, perhaps out of fear. Relying on moonlight alone made it difficult to pick out an opponent's form. To make matters worse, the spell I was using wrapped a barrier of wind around me, making it nearly impossible to hear outside sounds. Searching for a target by sound was out of the question.

As the chariot ahead entered the town, it raced through the streets without hesitation. I had no choice but to follow—and sure enough, the head that should have been on the rider's shoulders was nowhere to be found. Carried on the slow night breeze, the sound of a horse's neighing echoed!

Eventually, we reached the town square where the main streets intersected, and there it was. I turned around to see the Lamy townscape standing in the darkness. It appeared over there! I immediately spun on my heel.

"Leave it to me!"

I canceled the spell and dropped to the ground. Stone paving was beneath my boots. The sound of water reached my ears. With a roar from Dune, the chariot charged! In an instant, it bypassed me and headed straight for the town! A fountain using spring water made the water glitter in the moonlight. A few streetlamps flickered here and there as a mere formality, but the light of the full moon was stronger.

Tch, this was bad! I hurriedly chanted a spell under my breath.

"Raywing!"

I activated the high-speed flight spell and scrambled to follow!

Opposing us was an armored knight mounted on a horse. Bathed in the twin lights of the moon and the man-made lamps, two shadows faced off. One side went without saying: Dune and Hans standing in their two-horse chariot. The horses were exposed to the moonlight, glowing a hazy white.

But the opponent's mount was no white horse. It was a creature of bleached bone without a single shred of flesh. Astride the skeletal horse was a silver-armored knight. He held a lance

in his right hand and a helmet in his left. There was little useless decoration on the armor; the only distinguishing feature was a stone embedded in the forehead of the helmet, but judging by its dull luster even to my night-adapted eyes, it wasn't something you'd call a gemstone.

This time, there was no mistake. This Dullahan was the enemy I had to defeat.

"What's this? After the comrades comes a human woman? Quite a lot of guests tonight. Usually, people tend to avoid me."

The knight sitting on the bone horse spoke in a flippant tone. Since he was a Dullahan, I couldn't quite judge if he was looking at me or at Dune and Hans.

"My name is Dune," Dune addressed the opponent grandly. "As you can see, I am a Dullahan just like you. I am aware that you have been going around this town recently pronouncing death sentences upon people, but could you refrain from doing so a little? If such a situation continues, humans will begin a full-scale hunt for Dullahans. Naturally, that would be unpleasant for all Dullahans, including yourself."

The knight on the bone horse snorted at the persuasion.

"...Could you stop with that 'Sir' stuff? It's too stiff for me. I have a name: Feudore."

"Then, Master Feudore—"

"I refuse."

The Dullahan who called himself Feudore spoke quite bluntly.

"Is it fun?"

At my muttered words of anger, Feudore turned his helmet toward me, speaking as if he had only just noticed I was there.

"Oh? Why is a Dullahan hanging around with a living woman? Well, whatever. I'll explain it so even a living person can understand. We Dullahans don't remember much about what kind of people we were or what our names were when we were alive... only the burning resentment and grudges toward the living world. I'm sure I had all sorts of desires when I was alive, but I don't remember them much. And once you become a Dullahan, you stop feeling the kind of desires you had when you were living."

"You stop feeling... desires?"

As I whispered this, Dune explained while keeping his eyes fixed on Feudore.

"The five senses. Seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, and tasting. And the desire to satisfy each of those senses comfortably. It is no exaggeration to say that most desires held by the living are rooted in that."

"But you see," Feudore continued, "While we Dullahans can see and hear, the sense of touch is incredibly faint. Even if I know I'm touching something, it feels like I'm doing it through thick cloth. Taste and smell are gone completely. Do you get it? Do you know how bland that is?"

"I can only imagine... but..." I groaned.

I understood what Feudore meant. For example, what if smooth silk, fluffy yarn, and a rusted hunk of iron all felt exactly the same—just the sensation that you were "touching" something? What if taking a bath or being hit by lukewarm rain felt the same? And even worse! If taste and scent were sealed away and even the texture became dull, you wouldn't be able to tell the difference between beef, pork, or chicken, and you wouldn't be able to feel the plumpness of a shrimp! With pasta, you wouldn't be able to enjoy the different textures of spaghetti, tagliatelle, or macaroni! Well, putting aside the question of whether a Dullahan can even eat things in the first place!

The fact that you couldn't eat delicious food was hell enough, but if that applied to everything, how tasteless would daily life become? My skin crawled just imagining it. Were Dullahans living through days like that?

"I can't eat anything tasty. Even if I eat, it's not delicious at all. I don't get tired or sleepy, so even if I lounge around, it doesn't feel relaxing; it's just boring. At that point, it doesn't matter if you have money or not. That's why those living-style desires mostly fade away... but in their place, something else is born..."

The way Feudore spoke began to take on a slimy, vulgar tone.

"That... is the 'Pointing Desire'."

"The Pointing Desire?" My voice cracked involuntarily.

Feudore replied ecstatically, "Oh yes... once you become a Dullahan, you get a different kind of desire you can't taste when you're alive. It's irresistible... that sensation when you point at a target of your choice! You stretch out your arm, stick up one finger, and—*Bam!*—just like that! Straight as an arrow! You point your finger! Whether we want it to or not, the curse of the death sentence is cast!"

As Feudore spoke passionately, Dune spat out, "But by pointing, you are killing people! That is... base!"

"Who cares? We're dead too!"

Well, I didn't get it at all and didn't want to, but apparently, for a Dullahan, pointing at someone and sentencing them to death was a "good feeling."

"Fine! I get that Dullahans have this 'pointing desire' or whatever!"

Feudore said in a mocking voice, "Hey now. Dune, was it? Let's stop acting all refined. You're a Dullahan too, aren't you? Since you were born—no, died—as a Dullahan, don't tell me you don't have the pointing desire. Imagine it! A man or a woman. A child, an adult, or an old-timer. That feeling of satisfaction when you point at someone you like! Don't try to act cool! You want to point, too! Just be honest!"

"Anyway! I don't know what kind of sensation it is, but I've gathered that it's apparently pleasurable for you."

If I compared it to humans, even if the direction of the pleasure was different, it was like a delicious meal—no, that wasn't right. Humans die if they don't eat, but Dullahans didn't seem to perish if they held back from pointing. So, was it like the sensation a person who loves animals gets from squishing the paw pads of a puppy or kitten?

I snorted at Feudore's words.

"But in the end, it's just a selfish excuse for pointing at people and not caring if they get cursed or die just because it feels good! If you're going to act that way, you can't complain when you're exterminated!"

"Ha! Exterminated! You look like a sorceress, but do you think that stuff works on a Dullahan? Are you the type who mistakenly thinks they can take me down just because they can use a few spells? Any spell is meaningless if it doesn't hit!"

To the overconfident Feudore who was looking down on me, I replied with equal composure.

"It's just a matter of hitting you, isn't it?"

"Which do you think is faster? Me pointing at you, or you droning on with your long spells? Well, for my taste, I prefer the feeling of pointing at a middle-aged person who's a bit worn out by life rather than a brat who's just energetic like you."

What kind of preference was that? Whatever. Since I didn't know what the "pointing sensation" was, I couldn't even imagine it.

"Oh? You do know, don't you? That the curse takes a month to activate. Which do you think is faster? My spell blowing you away, or the curse taking effect and me dying? Well, I won't feel great being pointed at, but I just have to defeat you here. Even if you get scared of me and go into hiding after pointing, I can just go to a nearby Sorcerer's Association and have the curse removed with a simple procedure. In other words, saying 'I'll point at you if you defy me'

is just a childish threat. If anything, the fact that you can only threaten to point is proof you're scared of me."

...Well, in reality, it cost quite a bit to break the curse, so it would hurt my wallet, but still.

"You're an annoying woman..." Feudore's voice filled with rage at my cheap provocation.

"There you go, misunderstanding again. You're the one who picked a fight by pointing at people. I'm just accepting it. If you can't even understand that, it really speaks to how dim-witted you were when you were alive."

"Why you!"

With a roar, Feudore tightened his grip on his lance. Taking that as the signal for battle, I began my incantation!

"Drop dead, you bitch!"

As Feudore's horse kicked off the ground with a crude shout, it charged straight toward me! Its speed was quite impressive! It was going to crash into me before I finished my spell! The opponent's weapon was a leveled lance. I didn't know if it had physical attack power, but I didn't intend to find out by getting hit!

"Your charge is completely linear and simple!"

The instant Feudore's horse closed in, I dived diagonally forward and did a somersault on the road! That was the blind spot for an opponent holding a helmet in his left hand! The sound of hooves passed harmlessly by.

"—What!?"

Feudore sounded surprised. It seemed he hadn't expected me to dodge that clumsy charge. I didn't waste time; I was already moving into the next incantation!

"Plasma Blaze!"

The shockwave of blue light that was born pierced the night and raced toward Feudore from behind! Sensing it, Feudore hurriedly tried to maneuver his skeletal horse to dodge—but his reaction was too slow!

A scream echoed through the night town. Although it wasn't a direct hit, the attack gouged the horse's flank and caught Feudore's right leg. As proof, the skeletal horse stumbled and collapsed onto its knees on the spot, its form dissolving into the darkness a moment later.

The horse wasn't something he had "killed." It was a manifestation of Feudore's power—a part of him, so to speak. The previous attack had sapped his strength, making it difficult to

maintain, so he must have dismissed it. Feudore landed soundlessly on the earth, and as he turned toward me, he transformed his lance into a large sword.

"You brat... YOU!"

His roar shook with anger. He finally seemed to realize my true strength, but it was too late!

"I won't let you! If I get in close—!"

Feudore shouted and dashed toward me! Seeing that I specialized in projectiles, was he planning to close the distance? It was a textbook tactic, but naive! As soon as he entered my range and lunged with his sword, I activated my spell!

"Pulse Rod!"

The whip of light that extended from my palm tangled around his sword, and I snapped the blade in one go! The blade, which shouldn't have had a physical form, let out a metallic ring as it shattered and vanished into the void. I immediately swung the whip of light in a horizontal arc across Feudore's torso!

But... the whip only sliced through the afterimage of his armor. There was no feedback from the strike.

Tch, I didn't make it in time...

I extinguished the whip of light and let the tension drain from my shoulders with a deep sigh. I looked toward the shadow lingering a short distance away.

"I'm sorry, but it won't end with just that."

I cut him off before he could speak. A battle carriage rushed in from the side just as my attack was about to land, snatching Feudore away and saving him.

"......Dune....."

The truth was, I had wanted to finish Feudore off quickly before things reached this state, but...

"The request I accepted was to 'exterminate' the Dullahan who has been pointing his finger at everyone in this town."

"I have caused you trouble, Lina-dono. To you and to everyone else."

He addressed me with a voice tinged with self-reproach, though he didn't seem particularly apologetic.

"However, if he had not fought you and lost, this fellow would never have learned his place."

He then turned toward Feudore.

"Do you understand now, Lord Feudore? It is your own actions that invite the arrival of a master such as Lina-dono."

"......Ugh......!"

Feudore groaned resentfully. Perhaps realizing that making lame excuses was pointless, he looked toward me irritably—or rather, he simply turned the front of his helmet in my direction.

"If you swear to stop pointing your finger recklessly from now on, then I can overlook this. Otherwise, even I will no longer be able to shield you."

"......I..... I understand..... I swear—"

But.

"Oh, just so you know, I'm not saying I won't let you go just because I won't get my reward. It's about the fact that Feudore has already pointed at a great many people in this town. You understand what that means, don't you?"

Dune gasped at my point.

".....In other words..... there are already dead people..."

"Fortunately, it seems that hasn't happened yet. But if it's been nearly a month since the first person in town was pointed at, then if we leave them be, people will start dying one after another. It's easy enough to swear you won't do it again, but what happens to those people? Can Feudore do anything about it?"

A curse cannot be broken even by the Dullahan who cast it. Of course, it could be undone with proper treatment at the Sorcerers' Guild, but that required upfront payment. It wasn't an amount that would take a lifetime to pay off, but it also wasn't the kind of pocket change an average townsman could just toss out. I didn't think Feudore could produce enough gold to save every single person he had pointed at.

There was only one way to save the lives of all those people he had targeted so recklessly.

Namely: Feudore's annihilation.

".....B-But Lina-dono, Lord Feudore has already sworn not to point again. To destroy him so heartlessly would be....."

"Right. He couldn't beat me and got scolded by you. But is that remorse? Or just self-preservation? Look, I don't exactly enjoy finishing off someone who says 'I give up' either....."

Dune let out a heavy groan.

"That is... true, but....."

"Hmm? You can't move? Those people he cursed might die soon, but you're saying he should be saved just because he surrendered? I don't think that flies, does it?"

Dune cast aside Feudore, whom he had been holding, and spoke out.

"However, I too cannot stand by and watch an act such as destroying one who has shown the intent to surrender."

"Wait... just a minute!"

Dune remained facing me, even as Feudore let out a bewildered groan.

"I have no desire to cross blades with the Lina-dono to whom I owe a debt, but I cannot change my stance."

Despite his confusion, Dune spoke with conviction.

".....Well, I figured you'd say that..... but I can't just give up on my end either."

"If I were to say I cannot overlook this, then—?"

"Then I'd have no choice but to say I'll make you move aside by force."

That was the declaration of a rupture. A tense atmosphere drifted through the night.

"I didn't want it to come to this... Dune, if you insist on getting in my way, then depending on how things go, I might end up hurting you."

"Fighting Lina-san? I don't want to do that! She’s helped us out in so many ways!"

"That is certainly true... Hans-dono. However, even so, we cannot simply watch a fellow Dullahan be left to perish."

"I know, but... that doesn't mean we have to fight!"

To an outsider, the conversation between Hans and the Dullahan would have looked like nothing more than a one-man play using different voices.

"......I understand Hans-dono's feelings. But given the circumstances, I cannot retreat. Run."

Whether he was bewildered by the situation or realized that moving would signal the start of the battle, Feudore, who had been told to run, still didn't move.

"Run, I say! I cannot abandon you when you have said you will repent for the aftermath of your selfishness. Never show yourself in human settlements again, and cease your pointing as your whims dictate. If you understand, flee now. I shall buy you some time."

I let my hair and cloak flutter in the night wind. I'd had a bit of a hunch that things might turn out like this—this situation I'd wanted to avoid.

"......W-Who is that?"

Even I had almost forgotten he was there. Feudore, who didn't know the original circumstances, swung his helmet up, down, left, and right, looking all around.

Ignoring him, Dune, the armored knight riding a one-horse chariot, stood a short distance away.

"You guys.....! You're two people in one! Or rather, that Hans over there, your armor looks weirdly heavy and it makes noise... are you perhaps possessing a real suit of armor?"

"What are you doing! I told you to run!"

Dune scolded Feudore, who had finally grasped the situation and raised a voice of surprise, without even turning around.

".....A-Alright! I'll take you up on that for now!"

His tone didn't sound particularly grateful, but seeing that retreating was the best strategy, Feudore turned on his heel and began to flee.

His legs moved as if he were walking, yet through some mechanism, he moved at a speed close to a human's full sprint. Given he wasn't using a bone horse, perhaps the blow I landed earlier had sapped his power, making him unable to manifest one.

"Dammit! Dammit!"

Whatever the case, I had no intention of letting him get away!

"Elmekia Lance!"

I purposely watched for a moment, then invoked the spell I had been chanting while Hans and the others were arguing, launching it just after Feudore started running to gain some distance!

What I used was a high-speed projectile of spirit energy! It was a technique that could fell even lower-class demons! If it hit directly, he wouldn't get off easy! Given the distance and Feudore's posture, dodging should have been impossible!

Even if Dune came chasing after me, he wouldn't make it in time!

"Dammit!"

Feudore howled and countered from that position! He had experience in battle!

"Ray Wing!"

I mustered my spirit and surged upward, flying over the head of the blocking Dune! Dune looked up at me in a panic. If not for the wind barrier around me, I might have heard his gasp of shock.

After flying over him, I dropped my altitude and chased after Feudore along the ground! This spell's power—the sum of altitude, speed, and weight carried—is proportional to the caster's ability. By dropping altitude and focusing on speed, catching up was child's play!

Realizing I was gaining on him, Feudore spun the helmet he was holding and turned back. He stopped his feet and turned toward me, likely intending to dodge in the same way I had dodged his charge earlier.

Naive!

I dropped my flight speed, canceled the spell, and simultaneously began my landing, a dash, and the chant for the next spell! Feudore manifested a blade in his right hand again. Perhaps because he had been weakened after I broke it once, the blade was a bit shorter than before.

Just before I entered sword range, my spell was completed. But an instant before I could release it—!

"Take this!"

Feudore, howling in desperation, hurled the sword he held at me!

I instantly leaped to the side, dodging it! However, as soon as the sword left Feudore's hand, it vanished into the void like mist!

Now that I thought about it, of course it would! The sword was also something Feudore had manifested with his mental strength! Once it left his body, it would disappear!

Whether he did it out of sheer desperation or as a calculated move I didn't know, but either way, my posture was momentarily broken! In that gap, Feudore tried to jump back to gain distance—

I won't let you!

He manifested the sword again and struck down the lance of light I had fired! He didn't seem to have a bone horse, but it appeared his skill wasn't bad. Of course, the sword was part of him. He probably took some damage, but compared to a direct hit to the body, the harm was likely minimal.

I began chanting the next spell. The sound of wheels cut in!

"Flee! Lord Feudore!"

Dune's chariot came rushing in between me and Feudore!

"It's useless!"

Feudore cursed while changing direction to run again. Just as Dune had shouted, such an attack would deal no damage to a Dullahan like him who lacked a physical body.

I and Dune faced off once more. Before long, the dust settled.

"——Hm!"

Dune’s voice rang out in agitation. Would I try to shake him off the same way as before? No, Dune wasn't stupid. It was better to assume he had devised some countermeasures.

In that case, I'd just use a different trick!

I chanted a spell while running to the side. Dune steered the chariot to block my path.

"Mega Brand!"

I released the strike I had chanted toward Dune! It was a spell that explosively blew up the soil in the area to deal a blow to an opponent above!

Naturally, it didn't work! Had I been caught?!

That was to be expected. After all, I had fired a clearly ineffective blow, and when the air cleared, I had vanished.

Yes, that was a simple distraction! When the Dullahans were looking for an opponent, they would swivel their helmets around. In other words, they relied on sight. Therefore, I used an attack spell to ruin their visibility and took that chance to hide in the shadow of a nearby house!

While moving stealthily in hiding, I began chanting a spell under my breath.

"—Lord Feudore! Be careful! Lina-dono has disappeared!"

"What?!"

The voice Feudore raised at Dune's call was close to a scream. I couldn't see them from where I was, but I could clearly sense the color of agitation in his voice.

"Wh... where did she go?! Find her! Quickly!"

"Calm yourself, Lord Feudore!"

"How can I be calm?! That woman is definitely planning something!"

Listening to Feudore's raving, I activated the spell I had chanted.

"......Ray Wing (quietly)."

High-speed flight spells, currently on sale!

I cut through a street over and flew in one leap to near where Feudore was fleeing! I canceled the spell, landed, and while chanting an attack spell, I moved silently toward where I thought he was.

Having lost sight of me, a wary Feudore had likely stopped moving. If I circled around and launched a surprise attack from close range, this time for sure!

I went through a narrow alley, scanned the area... and my eyes met with Feudore, who just happened to be looking this way.

"She's heeeeere!"

Letting out a scream like a child who had seen a ghost, Feudore fled at high speed away from me and back toward Dune.

Tch! I could only say the timing was bad, but there was no use grumbling about it. To provide cover, Dune drove his chariot toward me.

"That's why I said we should stop fighting!"

Hans followed quite a bit behind.

"Elmekia Lance!"

I fired the spell I had chanted while chasing Feudore, hoping for a lucky hit, but it missed. Without a pause, I began the chant for the next one!

"Dammit! Dammit! I can't get away! Dammit! If I only had my horse!"

Feudore slid across the ground, cursing in his confusion, and passed Dune—then suddenly stopped making a fuss.

The helmet was turned toward the approaching Hans.

Wait, don't tell me—

The moment I thought it, Feudore shifted his course slightly and aimed straight for Hans at full power!

"Eh? Eh?"

Clang!

A diving kick slammed into the bewildered Hans.

"Waaaaah!"

"I'm borrowing this body!"

Hans let out a pathetic shriek as he was sent tumbling. In the process, the helmet he had been cradling popped out of his arms and went rolling across the ground. While Hans's own helmet shouted in confusion, his body floated into the air, clutching Feudore's helmet. Beneath it, a skeletal horse materialized!

Feudore had charged in and merged with him! Hans's body let out a metallic rattle.

"Eh?! Wait...?"

"Eeeeeeeeh!"

Hans's helmet let out a scream of pure shock as he finally realized what was happening: Feudore had hijacked his body.

The two-horse chariot Dune had shown us earlier was a combination of Hans—who possessed a physical suit of armor—and Dune. Normally, Dune could only maintain the form of a single-horse chariot on his own; he could only achieve that grander form by combining with

Hans. Having realized this, Feudore tried to do the same. By seizing Hans’s armor, he saved enough energy to manifest a horse of his own!

He likely intended to use that speed to shake me off, but he was naive. His judgment of the situation was fatally flawed. Feudore’s bone horse kicked off the ground, moving with a speed that felt like flight—but it only ran for a single instant.

Cr-crack!

The cobblestones buckled and surged upward, transforming into a whip that lashed out and ensnared the horse's legs, halting it mid-stride.

"Wh—what?!"

Feudore turned his helmet—his gaze—toward the source. Stone vines were coiled tightly around the bone horse's legs. Following those vines back, I found the tip of a sword thrust into the pavement.

It was Dune. He was the one who had stopped the horse. He had extended his spiritual form through the blade, seizing the cobblestones and manipulating them like reaching ivy.

"Let go, damn you! What the hell do you think you're doing?!"

"That is my line."

I felt as though Dune’s non-existent eyes flashed with a sharp, angry glint.

"Hans-dono is a great benefactor to me. I will not stand by and watch someone bring him harm."

"B-Benefactor? This lukewarm wimp?!"

"I will not forgive an insult to Hans-dono."

I began chanting an attack spell as I walked toward Feudore. He struggled to escape, but the gap in power between him and Dune as Dullahans was simply too great. There was no sign of the restraints loosening.

"F-Fine! I get it! My bad! I just got a little confused because I was being chased! I take back the insult to Hans-dono! I'll give the body back! So just let me go for now!"

Dune remained silent despite the shouting. That was only natural. Of all things, Feudore had done the one thing Dune considered the ultimate sin. Once, Dune had stolen Hans's body out of vanity. Hans had eventually forgiven him, but seeing Feudore now, Dune likely saw a reflection of his past self.

That was exactly why he couldn't forgive it.

"I’m begging you! I said I’m giving it back! Look! See!"

The moment he spoke, Hans’s armor collapsed with a clatter. Simultaneously, what had been a bone horse an instant ago transformed back into Feudore, his legs still bound by the stone vines.

"I gave it back! You see?! So let go of my legs! Hurry!"

At that desperate cry, Dune spoke in a quiet voice.

"You swore to stop your reckless pointing, however—"

"Yeah! I'll stop! I won't do it anymore! So—"

"—you only said that to escape."

"Therefore," Dune declared, "I do not believe a scoundrel who harms his own kind will keep his word. I have no reason to shield you further."

The stone vines released Feudore’s legs just as my spell reached completion. Feudore stumbled forward from the sudden release, and my blue light swallowed him whole.

"Blam Blazer!"

Whether the sound that echoed was a cry of resentment or a final death throe, I didn't know. After he vanished into the void, the curse likely vanished with him.

The night ended with Feudore's defeat. After explaining to the townsfolk that the Dullahan had been dealt with, I headed to a Sorcerers' Guild in a distant city to confirm that the cursed victims were safe.

The sun was strong. I stayed in town for a few days to make sure everyone was okay, and it was a morning that could still be called early when I finally set out. It wasn't exactly the right time of day for Dullahans to be wandering about, but there was a shadow in the darkness beneath the trees lining the highway.

Noticing it, I stopped and called out.

"Yo. What are you doing out at this hour?"

"How was it?"

"The curses? Yeah, they were broken."

The armored knights on the two-horse chariot—Dune and Hans—remained in the shadows as they spoke. They had come just to hear that news.

"I picked this up."

Dune held up a small stone. It was a dull green, polished but not quite a gemstone. I recognized it immediately.

"That's Feudore's..."

It was the decorative stone that had been on his forehead. It was likely his "anchor" to this world, or perhaps his core.

"He won't be coming back. His consciousness is gone. As a Dullahan, he is destroyed."

"I see."

"Take care, then, Lina-san."

"You too... well, it's weird to say 'stay healthy,' but stay safe."

We exchanged those parting words.

"A tiny fragment of his regret and despair remains in this stone. As a fellow Dullahan, I intend to carry this stone and his bitterness with me."

"Bye-bye, Lina-san!"

Dune and Hans vanished into the darkness created by the leaves.

Don't carry that kind of stuff! Throw it in a ditch! I wanted to scream it, but the sensibilities of the living and the dead are different. Besides, it wasn't my place to criticize after I was the one who finished him off right in front of Dune.

So, I just said, "Yeah."

"Since he loved pointing so much, I'll point at grasshoppers and stuff for him sometimes so he can sleep in peace," Hans added innocently.

"......R-Right....."

Feudore... I couldn't exactly feel sorry for him, but being remembered by grasshoppers felt less like a memorial and more like a final prank.

I turned back to the sun-drenched road. We each went our separate ways.

(Finished: Comfortably Pointing)

Afterword

Author: When summer comes, it brings back memories! The taste of that watermelon I ate at my grandma’s house!

Kanzaka Hajime + L-zu presents: *Princia, the Magical Old Woman*! Special Volume 29.

L: .....Though, about this "Magical Old Woman" in the title... I can't help but feel it's more like a deliberate act of harassment toward the readers.....

Author: Hah! How shallow of you!

L: Shallow?!

Author: These days, due to various... sensitive crimes, public sentiment and the way fiction is handled have become quite delicate! You see it all the time: characters who look like little girls and act like little girls, but their "setting" says they're 18, or 80, or hundreds of years old[3] ! All I did was take that trope and add a twist by removing the "looks like a little girl" part!

L: You actually removed it?! I mean, I have a feeling that "twist" is something absolutely no one in the world asked for..... But seriously... this is the one thing you just can't do!

Author: Ugh..... shot down without mercy... So this is what they call being too far ahead of one's time.....!

Author: But look, there are things like *How*l's Moving Castle!

L: Don't you dare put them in the same category! You're going to get us yelled at by all sorts of people!

Author: No, no, of course I don't mean they're the same. I mean, over there, the character looks like an old woman but is a girl on the inside. In our case, the outside and the inside are the same, and it’s only the mental age and behavior patterns that are child-like!

L: I don't care about the difference. It's a no-go either way.

[3] Ye Old Sasami Trope

Author: But people have been saying for ages that "you never know what will sell in this world." If you think about it that way! It wouldn't be strange if ten or twenty animation studios came crawling to us saying, "We want to do a spin-off anime of *Princia, the Magical Old Woman*!"

L: It would be incredibly strange! What kind of anime industry is that?! There's no way that's happening! .....Well, I guess a lot of spin-offs do end up becoming magical girl parodies[4]...

L: No! Even if the universe does a full reset, that era will never come! If we're doing a spin-off, I should be the lead!

"It should be something like *The Little Demon Lord-sama*."

"You actually added '-sama' yourself," the Author remarked. "But wouldn't that just be: 'Oh no! The lady next door is in trouble!' followed by you bludgeoning her to death with a magical spiked hammer and saying, 'There, now you don't have to worry anymore!' I feel like every episode would end that way."

"Well, that's more or less it," I replied. "Though since it's for prime time, I'd keep the gore a bit restrained."

"You want a prime-time slot?!" the Author cried. "The nerve! Besides, bludgeoning and blood on prime time would never pass the broadcasting ethics committees![5]"

"But you know, these days it's fine as long as you put a disclaimer on the screen! You could just run a caption saying: 'This program contains scenes of bloodshed, but it's just the character's style, so please deal with it.'"

"That's not a disclaimer! And you can't just 'deal with' it! Sure, when you watch old anime DVDs, you see expressions that couldn't be aired today, but right now? It's impossible! Absolutely impossible!"

"Then what if we add a narration for 'educational consideration'?" I suggested. "'L-sama bludgeoned the lady to death, but was there perhaps another way to solve the problem? Let's think about it together with your mother!' That would make it even more—"

"Even more hopeless! How is that educational?! I mean, wait a second... lately in entertainment, there's this trend where 'even bad people have their own circumstances.' The kind of villain who just does nasty things because they're a villain—like in the old days—is disappearing. Maybe there's a lack of characters who serve as a 'terrible example' to make the

[4] Ye Olde Magical Girl Pretty Sammy Trope.
[5] Is this a Bludgeoning Angel reference?

audience think, 'I never want to be like that person.' Though... having the protagonist in that position is probably a bad idea."

"Are you aware that you just called me the type of villain people don't want to grow up to be?"

"Yep."

"You did that on purpose!"

Smack-smack-smack-smack-smack!

Oops! I lost my cool! Even if I was ticked off, using a nearby oxtail as a deadly weapon was a bit too simplistic. Still, my reflexes kicked in and told me it would be a waste of good food, so I didn't use the lamb block sitting next to it. I felt like I should praise myself for that bit of restraint.

However! Even if I forgave that verbal abuse, my 1.1 billion fans across India would never allow it! And of course, neither would I! In other words, this was the will of the people!

...Alright! My logic was flawless!

Now that the legitimacy of hitting the Author with an oxtail was successfully proven... until next time, everyone!